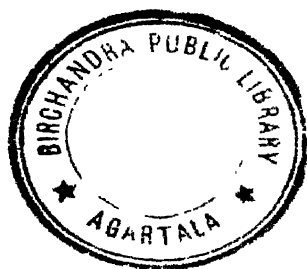


ROGER LONGRIGG

DAUGHTERS OF
MULBERRY



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I

GIGGLES BALLANTYNE, thirty-eight but girlish always, looked at her race-card with bright interest.

'Ooh, what a lot of names,' she cried. 'However can you tell which one to bet on?'

'There's form, for instance,' said Mr Doff. 'Tricky, this lot, eh, Harry?'

'Tricky it is,' said Mr Harriss. 'What about a lady's fancy?'

'Ooh,' said Giggles, 'there's one called Lavender Lady!'

'Topical tip,' said Mr Doff, and laughed his off-duty laugh.

'Have a little bit on your fancy,' urged Mr Harriss. 'Just for fun, have a flutter, be a devil!'

'Ooh, would you show me how?'

'Do it *for* you.'

'Would you really? That's frightfully sweet of you.'

'Think nothing of it,' Mr Harriss, in a pale blue suit that seemed to be made of paper, waved jauntily and hurried away.

'Bloke I want a word with, only be a minute,' said Mr Doff, and called to a man in a terra-cotta hat. Soon he was talking earnestly, laughing his on-duty laugh.

Giggles Ballantyne sighed, and (as so often) waited patiently till the gentlemen were free to talk to her again.

It was Ascot on a scorching Friday: the first day of the two-day July meeting. Twenty-past two, and the runners for the first race were getting ready to leave the paddock and go down to the six-furlong start. Giggles Ballantyne, all alone, teetered unhappily on tall pin heels. The sun was blazing. She felt damp all down the middle of her back. She had eaten, too quickly, a veal-and-ham pie in the car park, leaning on the bonnet of Mr Doff's Jag. To her right, in

Tattersalls' Enclosure, the bookies were making a merry noise. To her left, from the direction of the paddock, people were trickling into the stand or over to the rails to make their bets. Round her, on wooden benches, tough old ladies sat in the sun. Young men in curly hats and middle-aged men with dark pink faces and tall women in navy blue hurried purposefully, this way and that, on urgent insiders' errands which baffled Giggles, but which she envied: feeling, herself, uneasy and out of touch.

She looked down the sloping lawn, over the grim women. There was the broad, brilliant green of the course. And there, beyond, was another crowd: the jolly tieless crowd who got in without paying. There were tents, Giggles could see, with Bass and Watneys bravely displayed. There were people with religious sandwich-boards. She guessed, with weepy regret, at jellied eels and bits of Cheddar: at children, Woodbines, bottles of brown, and Walls fourpenny chocolate blocks. That was her world. That's where Fred would have taken her, her sweet long-lost Flight Sergeant. But he had been killed and she had graduated (imperceptibly, half-happily) into this world of lavender silk, this two-pound-ten Members' Enclosure, these gentlemen friends in Homburg hats. Well, Mr Doff, he was a new friend. He had a little factory on the Great West Road, making nylon blouses. Mr Harriss she had only met today, but she could tell Mr Harriss would be round at the Club, or ringing up and saying 'supper at the Eve?'

And here he was, fluttering two little slips of paper. 'You want to look after these. Did you on the Tote each way - get a better price, being an outsider.'

'Ooh,' said Giggles, 'could you possibly look after them for me?'

'Next to my heart,' he promised roguishly.

The crowd thickened round them. People pulled race-glasses out of their cases and strung them ready round their necks. The stands, behind, were packed. The jungle noise from the bookies (parakeets, lions, gibbons) grew even louder. Now the horses were going down: one, then a group,

then three together: spare and lightly-fleshed, with the brilliant gloss of midsummer. They cantered with awkward elegance, some pulling hard, some twisting their necks so that their great puzzled eyes stared at the crowd. The jockeys, little leather faces under huge gay caps, rode with short reins, leaning far forward.

'Pardon me,' said Mr Doff. 'Hope Harry looked after you.'

'Beautifully, thank you,' said Giggles, dimpling at Mr Harriss.

'You haven't had a big bet, mind,' said Mr Harriss.

'Ooh, I should hope *not*.'

The crowd grew denser. People lit cigarettes nervously.

'*They're off*,' boomed the loudspeaker.

Giggles glanced round. Thousands of people! Each one faced right, down towards the distant start. There was a buzz, controlled but powerful, like the noise of an enormous generator. The bookies still chattered, and over all the loudspeaker boomed a catalogue of names.

'Come on,' cried Giggles, laughing at the fun.

'Come on you fat cow, come on lovely girl,' said a thin voice far above Giggles's head. She glanced upwards, and was surprised at what she saw. It was a very tall, thin old man in a dark blue suit, standing just behind her. He was leaning forward, so that his race-glasses were almost directly over her head. He twitched as he spoke, as though riding a bronco in a dream. 'Get along, beautiful - come on now, come *on* you silly little thing -' His face, Giggles thought, looked very healthy and very unhealthy at the same time. His hands, gripping the race-glasses, were huge and red and bony. 'Come along, silly bitch, *careful* -'

'Half way,' said Mr Doff.

'Anybody's race,' said Mr Harriss.

'No nonsense now, get *on*,' muttered the thin old man with bitter, private intensity. He wore a blue and white striped shirt with very long points to the collar, and a grubby tie in equal stripes of dark red and dark blue, and a very dirty brown hat in extreme contrast to the fawn and pearl-grey

Homburgs of Mr Doff and Mr Harriss. 'Fat little cow, *run then -*'

The crowd were all shouting now, one name or another or something wordless and passionate.

'Come on, come on,' Mr Doff called hoarsely.

'Ride her,' shrilled Mr Harriss.

'Lavender Lady,' cried Giggles.

There was a crescendo of noise. The loudspeaker grew excited, reeling off names. Brilliant horizontal shirts flashed by, and something won.

'Ha *ha*,' crowed Mr Harriss.

'What won?' asked Giggles.

'Damn,' said the thin old man bleakly. Lowering his race-glasses he struck Giggles a glancing blow on the shoulder.

'Ow.'

'I do beg your pardon,' he said gently. 'Clumsy of me, forgive me.'

'Ooh, that's all right,' said Giggles. 'Nothing, really.'

'I'm afraid I must have hurt you,' said the old man, his face full of concern. He took off his hat, revealing a little sandy hair on a narrow red skull. 'Extremely sorry.'

'Really nothing, only a tap,' said Giggles. 'Thanks ever so much.'

'Sure?' said the old man. 'What? Nothing I can do?'

'Cross my heart,' said Giggles.

The old man nodded, smiling gently, and put his race-glasses back in their case. Then he turned and pushed away through the crowd.

'Drink, drink, I think we can run to a little one after *that*,' said Mr Harriss.

'Goody,' said Giggles, always game.

They began to head towards the bar behind the stand. In front of them, high above all heads, swam the hat of the thin old man in blue.

The thin old man was thinking: when am I going to make my money? *When am I going to make my money?*

He was called Major Desmond Cook, and he was old and broke and frightened.

Only the first race, he thought in despair. Five more to come. Tired already – feet, legs, back, everything.

He went to the bar and drank some brandy, studying his form-books and writing figures on a piece of paper. Presently he felt better and walked more bravely out of the bar and down towards the rails to have a bet.

Laurie Love, in neat mauve flannels and mauve checked tie, leaned his elbows on the rails.

‘Even money, evens the field,’ he called.

Each side of him, the length of the chest-high railing, the other credit bookmakers leaned from Tattersalls’ into the Members’. It was ten minutes before the second race, and the paved strip running down the edge of the lawn was thronged with people making bets (low-voiced, as though the horse’s name were a tender secret and the bookie a confidant; or brazen, defying someone to call them madcaps) and with people wondering what bets to make.

Laurie took off his pale green hat and flapped it, fanning himself.

‘Seven to four bar one,’ he called. ‘Lumme, George,’ he murmured to his clerk, ‘here’s Des the dreamer.’

Towards them, edging politely between some very young men, came a tall familiar figure in an old blue suit.

‘Dog Collar?’ he asked abruptly.

‘Evens, Major.’

‘Five hundred, please.’

‘Excuse me, sir, but you’re into us for three after the first. Right, George?’

‘Right, Mr Love,’ said the clerk, glancing unnecessarily at his book.

‘That’s exactly why I want five on this,’ said the tall man mildly.

‘Well, now, Major, we don’t want to be disobliging –’

‘Old client.’

'Specially to an old client, as you say, sir. But my directors did just specially mention your limit, Major -'

'Oh, very well. Four-fifty.'

'That's it, Major Cook, sir, thank you - up to the seven-fifty limit.'

The tall old man nodded affably and edged away through the gathering crowd.

'Got a nice price, he has,' said George. 'They're taking six to four in the Ring while you was talking.'

'We'll have it back,' said Laurie. 'Today, tomorrow, maybe next week at Kempton.'

'You sure? He has a big win sometimes.'

'Yes, an' keeps it how long?'

'Nice old stiff, though.'

'*Cert'nly* he's nice.'

A thick woman with a dead-white face interrupted them to have a brusque seven-and-sixpence on the favourite.

'Never like that, our Des,' said Laurie, 'never.'

'Well now, well now, well now, *well* now,' thought Mr Harriss, glancing at Giggles Ballantyne's luscious profile. 'I wonder.'

He had given her a large gin and ginger ale. He had backed her fancy for her on the four-shilling Tote. He had grasped her juicy elbow, steering her, when they threaded the crowd outside the Members' bar. And early next week, perhaps -

'*They're off.*'

Presently Mr Harriss became aware, through the noise of crowd and bookies and loudspeaker commentary, of a thin intense voice above him and a little to his left: 'Come on you fat pig,' said this keening voice, 'clever boy, lovely man -'

Even in his own excitement Mr Harriss took his eyes from his glasses and looked upwards. What he saw revolted him: a real shoddy old scruff. The suit would be dear at thirty bob in the Lane. And the tie, now, actually frayed, and needing a rub with Dabitoft.

'Hurry up, no nonsense now,' whined this sad old horror, 'come along fat lout, my beautiful boy - '

The noise of the crowd boiled up and up.

'*And at the line it's Dog Collar,*' boomed the loudspeaker.

'Ha ha,' crowed Mr Harriss, 'up we come again!'

'Ooh *honestly?*' asked Giggles, unable to credit such skill.

Mr Harriss glanced up at the tall old scruff. The old fool's hands were trembling and his face was completely blank. Lost his lolly, thought Mr Harriss. Poor old seven-foot dustbin.

But Major Cook was thinking: Ha. Made a start. Feet less tired, legs a little better. Have another drink and think about the next. And *this* time, possibly *this* time - say by the end of the season, say by the end of the year. . . .

He imagined for a second, giddily, making all the money he needed: and his mind's eye saw, for the millionth time, the seemly house and decent farm where he would live and die.

He put his race-glasses away and stepped out briskly towards the bar.

Jimmy, in the bar behind the stand, heard the roar. Finish. In a minute they'd be back. He put single and double measures of gin ready in a massed platoon of glasses, and saw his minerals were ready, necks outmost, and his lemons cut and his ice-buckets full and his bar wiped more or less dry. The roar of the crowd was fading. Jimmy shot his cuffs, ready for them all.

'Fourteen large gin and tonics - '

'Pimm's, please - '

'I got evens about that one.'

'Nasty little price on the Tote, I expect.'

'Eight small gins, two large brandies, one tomato juice - *sure, Junie?*'

'Lager? Got lager?'

'Next one's a puzzle.'

'Well, *Philip* says - '

‘Well, I heard *Tommy* say -

Jimmy flew to and fro, sweating freely, trying to be fair but earning hatred, serving men like teddy-bears and women like cooks and men like generals and women like men.

‘That’s eight - got them, Ted? - ten, twelve - ’

‘Pimm’s, please.’

‘Paid four-and-nine on the Tote. Not worth the bet.’

‘Not worth collecting.’

‘Of course it’s worth *collecting*.’

‘Lager have you got? I say, lager?’

‘Brandy and soda.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Jimmy to a tall blue shape, ‘one small - ’

‘Large.’

‘Sorry, Major, didn’t see you. Got the winner of the next?’

‘I will have.’

Major Cook, this was: the most regular of Jimmy’s regulars at every course he worked at. Friendly old soak, nice and polite to the tea-ladies. Wonderful tips he sometimes had, say usually on one of the first four races. By the fifth he might be getting silly, like plunging on an outsider. No wonder, all that brandy.

‘Here we are, sir. Soda to the top?’

‘Thank you very much.’

The Major pulled out *Raceform*, *Timeform*, *The Sporting Life*, the racing editions of all three London evening papers, and piled all these on the bar. Now he pulled out half a dozen foolscap sheets, covered in names and notes and sums. He made to spread these on the bar beside his books.

‘Just a seccy, sir - ’ Jimmy wiped away the rings of lager and tonic and champagne, making a special nice dry place for the Major’s papers.

‘Thank you, Jimmy.’

Major Cook bent to his calculations. People pressed round.

‘Fizz here, fizz! Fizz, George? Fizz, Ellen?’

‘Two lights, please –’

‘I don’t know what to back in the next. Do you know what to back in the next?’

‘Well, *my* little paper says –’

‘Well, *my* little paper says –’

‘Pimm’s, please –’

Major Cook was sweating a little. He took off his hat and put it on a chair by the bar, then frowned again at his figures. The crowd eddied and shouted.

‘Making?’

‘So far, touch wood.’

‘Ha ha, touch wood.’

‘Just a little bit of tonic, when *when* –’

Into this jolly scrimmage now strode a party: a strange party, which rolled like a heavy tank through the crowded room. In the van, as shock-troops, two dour, stocky Italians stumped and shoved. One was completely bald, with a domed yellow head and little black eyes. The other was young and plump and wore a purple cap.

‘I say,’ said indignant voices, ‘do you mind?’

‘What, in God’s name –?’

‘Just where, in God’s name –?’

‘Do you, look here, do you *mind*?’

But the two Italians, impassive, elbowed and thrust. Behind them came another Italian, soft and middle-aged, in a pearl-grey suit; a terrible old woman; and a dark young man with a pretty fair girl. The old woman had red hair, many jewels, and expensive clothes suitable to a girl of twenty. She was talking voluble Italian to the middle-aged man. The young man looked excited and happy and the girl excited too, but nervous.

The two tough men in the front paused, looking round. The only empty table was the one at the far end, by Major Cook. The girl saw it and pointed, touching the young man’s arm.

‘Will that do for your mother, Mario?’

‘I think it must. *Eccoci, Mamma.*’

The old woman, interrupted, looked at the damp table

with contempt. She switched from Italian into broad, native Scots: 'What sort of bloody table is this?'

'It's all there is, *Principessa*,' said the girl nervously.

'*L'unica* - ' agreed the pearl-grey man in a mumble, long-ing to sit down. He looked hot and bothered and bullied.

'All right. I'll have some whisky, Mario.'

'*Sì, Mamma*. And you, darling?'

'I'll just have - ' as the girl spoke she sat uneasily down: but rose again immediately, and picked up Major Cook's greasy old hat. She had flattened it.

She held it up, embarrassed. 'Whose hat is this? Excuse me, is this your hat?'

The Major, jerking out of his abstraction, took a moment to focus. 'Hat?'

'Is it yours?'

'Certainly it's mine.'

'I am so sorry.' She blushed unhappily and handed it to him. 'I'm afraid I've ruined it.'

'Hat,' muttered Cook, pushing it absently back into shape.

'I am so sorry,' said the girl again. 'I wasn't looking, and I just - '

'Sit down, girl, for the Lord's sake, and be quiet,' said the Princess brutally. 'Mario, hurry up with those drinks. *E tu, Pierino, allora* - '

'You've broken my concentration,' said Major Cook crossly. 'I might have found the winner. You've broken my train of thought.'

None of them heard him. He collected his papers, finished his drink, and started grumpily out.

Laurie Love was hot. His damp face became the rough yellow-red of London brick; his hat was canted loosely over his nose, shading his eyes from the pitiless sun; his suit grew wrinkled and clinging. Hard work, this third race. Very open, nothing outstanding, anybody's guess, four joint favourites. Big betting race, since punters (the nuts) always have most on when it's most difficult.

'Well, Major, what can I do for you, sir?'

'Not betting.'

'Come, sir, after that good thing in the last?'

'I didn't finish my prep. Got interrupted. Have to leave it alone. The one after, though . . . How do I stand with you?'

'One hundred and fifty pounds up, sir.'

'So with my credit I can bet nine.' Major Cook nodded. His purple face, high above Laurie's, was friendly but thoughtful. 'Have to see. Have to check.' He potted away.

'I don't get it,' said George the clerk.

'Oh, Des bets sensible, early in the day.'

'I mean I don't get the set-up. What's *wiv* him, reely?'

'He's trying to make his fortune, stupid. Been trying since God was a boy. So what he does, he lets his winnings add up. Won't touch them, won't take a cheque, puts it on the next one, see?'

'That's sensible, far as it goes.'

'Ah, but he wants his killing, see? One big lump, making his fortune. So he goes and has a bust on a long-shot, maybe in the fifth or the last, hoping he'll get it short-cut, like, all in a bang. But he won't, poor old Des.'

'Lumme, s'pose he did?'

'We'd be moaning, George.'

'Funny way to live.'

'I dunno. He'll be doing it till he dies, poor old duck.'

At half past three, under the hot blue sky, the third race was duly run and won and roared at. Major Cook, uninvolved, smiled benignly at the proceedings: and hurried, immediately after the official result went up on the numbers board, abstractedly to the bar with his form-books ready in his hand.

Soon he had another large brandy and soda.

'Well, sir, got the next one?' said Jimmy.

'Think so. Got to check.' Cook spread out his papers. 'It looks cut and dried but I'd better check.'

Oh Jesus, thought Jimmy, he's going to have some more

bets. Three more races, more drinks in between, bound to go down with a bump. If not today then tomorrow or next week. Someone's trod on his hat and his hands are shaking. Down with a bump. By Jesus, thought Jimmy, I feel sorry for him.

THE television commentator sat in his box high above the paddock on the roof of the Tote building. He watched, alternately, the horses coming into the parade-ring and his small grey monitor screen, and talked, brightly and rapidly, into a microphone:

'... thank you, Bill, yes, the first of the runners for this fourth race here at Ascot are coming into the paddock. This is a two-year-old race – rather an indifferent field – we may discover a star out of this lot, haha, one for the old notebook for next year's classics, haha, but none of these runners have yet revealed themselves as anything out of the ordinary. Now before I tell you about them let's call in the voice of Doug Carstairs to give us any news he has of the betting –'

'Thank you, Colin –' the voice of the rails commentator crackled out of Colin's earphones – 'well, we've found a very hot favourite here – they go seven to four Poison Ivy, fives Arabella, ten to one bar those two –'

In the big paddock below the car park some of the horses were being led round before going into the parade-ring. One of them, led by a dapper travelling-lad, was a bright chestnut filly with a lot of white on her face. Watching her was an odd group: the Princess of the fierce red hair, Mario her son, the fair girl, the pearl-grey Italian with the bullied look, and a brown young man with a lot of badges on his race-glasses – the horse's trainer. The two tough outriders had disappeared.

'She looks very well, Jack,' said Mario. 'England must suit her.'

'Thank you,' said the trainer. 'I must say she's been going very nicely at home.'

'She's a beauty,' said the girl.

'*È bellissima,*' murmured the pearl-grey man, looking at the filly and whistling.

'You made me run her in this, Mario,' said the trainer, 'and – honestly, I'd sooner let her take her chance against some good ones.'

'No, no, Jack, this is her class.'

'Slow as a pig,' said the Princess. '*Non è vero, Pierino?*'

'*Non so, Altezza – è tanta bella –*'

'She's nothing. You'll see.'

The trainer and the girl glanced at each other, surprised.

'Of course, you know her better than anyone, Princess,' said the trainer cautiously.

'I should.'

'But we think,' said the girl, 'we think she's –'

'Let your brother do the thinking, girl. Is he the trainer or you? Och, would I have given the filly to my useless son if she'd win any races for me?'

Mario smiled. 'That's true, Mamma.'

'Take my advice and run her in sellers. All she's good for – that or the kennels.'

'But. . . .' said the trainer, still frowning with surprise.

'Well, we ought to be getting into the ring.'

'Ay,' said the Princess. 'Off and be gawped at.'

'*Dove serai, Mamma?*' said Mario.

'Me? I'll be peering from somewhere.'

The Princess stumped off, a cloud of vermillion hair over the frills and bows of her dress. Pierino trotted after her. The others started for the parade-ring.

' . . . thank you, Doug,' said the television commentator, 'well, here we are back in the paddock and all the runners are now in the ring.' He felt the sun hot through his shirt. What a pity, he thought, he couldn't take it off and get a bit of tan. 'And here, yes, one we haven't looked at, number eleven, Yellow Silk – nicely bred filly by Mulberry out of the Italian mare Yellowhammer – trained by Jack Curtis at Lambourn, and there is Jack Curtis – ' The camera waggled, then settled on the brown young trainer with the

badges on his race-glasses – ‘This filly has no form over here, but she ran in Italy before she came over here last month – er, twelfth of fifteen at Monza, er, eleventh of twelve at Rome – I don’t think that form recommends her much, hahaha – now here is Poison Ivy, most people’s idea of the winner – oh *there*, by the way – can you go left a bit, that’s it, stay there for a moment – there is Prince Mario Montevarese, owner of Yellow Silk – that’s his fiancée, I think, with him, hope so anyway, haha, Miss Polly Curtis, Jack’s sister – all in the family, so to speak, haha – Prince Montevarese’s father was of course a great figure on the Italian turf until his death just before the war – Ah, Poison Ivy in our picture again, now he ran quite promisingly at Salisbury last week – ’

Major Cook, still studious in the bar, got another drink.

‘Found the winner, sir?’ asked Jimmy.

‘Think so,’ said Cook, not looking up.

Then he was annoyed to feel a hand on his shoulder.

‘Desmond!’ said a cheerful voice. ‘Hi, Desmond!’

Cook looked up briefly, and was annoyed no longer.

‘Hullo, Roly. Have a drink. I won’t be a moment – just double-checking.’

‘Got the winner?’

‘Have a drink and be quiet.’

Roly Kenwood-Kentish ordered a whisky and water and sipped it, looking at Cook. Poor old Desmond, he thought. Still chasing his crock of gold. He’s ageing, poor old boy. Getting that puffy look under the eyes.

Presently Roly (who was very rich) unclipped his gold propelling-pencil and passionately calculated his winnings up to the moment. Six-and-three up on the first. Five-and-eleven up on the second. Eight bob down on the third. He added it up in the margin of his race-card. Twelve-and-two minus eight – four and twopence up. Good. Pay for a drink.

‘Hey, Desmond,’ he said, ‘hurry up. I’ll buy you a drink.’

‘Thank you, Roly.’

‘You must have got the winner by now.’

'Ha. . . .'

After a moment Cook slapped his hand triumphantly on the bar and began to gather up his papers. 'Yes. Open and shut.'

'Well?'

'Poison Ivy.'

'The favourite,' said Roly, disappointed.

'I don't doubt he's the favourite.'

'Excuse me, sir,' said Jimmy, 'I heard the trainer say they fancied Arabella.'

Cook looked at him, surprised. 'I can't think why.'

'You going to back Poison whatnot?' asked Roly.

'Of course I'm going to back it.'

'Raised the wind for your house yet?'

'Very soon. Very soon indeed.'

'Listen, Desmond,' began Roly unhappily.

'Got to go and see them in the paddock,' said Cook. 'You coming?'

'In a minute.'

Cook nodded, smiled at them both, and walked out into the sun.

Jimmy coughed. 'The Major buying a house, sir?'

'He's been talking about it for years. Retiring, he says.'

'I shall miss him - we all will.'

Roly laughed briefly. 'Don't worry. Just a little water, thank you, fine. Don't worry - every three weeks he's almost there, and then he comes down with a thud.'

'I know, sir. . . Seems a shame.'

'Yes.' Roly stared down at the gleaming chestnut of his beautifully polished shoes. It was a shame.

Presently Roly stood by the paddock rails with his formidable sister. She had caught him, calling out over the crowd, as he came sadly out of the bar thinking about old Desmond.

'That's a nice one,' said his sister. 'Snapdragon. Stands over a lot of ground.'

'Dog,' said Roly absently, glancing at the grey bay colt. 'Didn't run on at Newbury.'



The grass in the paddock was the best watered of all – a rich, vivid green under the exhausting sun. In the shade of the big cool tree in the middle some owners stood, watching their horses walk round and round: a woman like an elderly pigeon, a duke, two tiny men in bowlers. Trainers with misshapen felt hats talked to their jockeys. The jockeys nodded: small, brilliant birds with placid faces. On the course side of the paddock the low stands were packed; on the other side, where Roly and his sister stood, experts crowded four deep.

‘I think,’ said Roly suddenly, ‘I’ll ask Desmond Cook for Goodwood.’

‘Are you mad? Dreadful old soak.’

‘He’s our age, Lillian.’

‘He can’t be.’

‘I assure you. That’s to say he was two years ahead of me at school. Not seventy.’

‘So dreadfully scruffy always. I don’t like to think of him on the furniture. Ah, there’s a nice one –’ she looked at her card – ‘Arabella.’

‘No chance, Desmond says. What do you mean, scruffy? He goes to the same tailor I do.’

‘When did he last? Now what about the one – Poison Ivy?’

‘That’s the winner.’

A tiny man in a heavy white mackintosh sidled up to Roly.

‘Excuse me, sir, I don’t know if it would interest you, but I have the winner of the last race –’

‘Not at all.’

‘No offence, do you see, but recognizing a fellow Irishman –’

Roly turned brusquely. ‘I’m not an Irishman. Run along.’

The tiny man nodded quickly, as though used to this kind of thing. He hurried away, looking for a kind face.

Roly looked after him. ‘Good God – a damned great coat like that in this heat.’ He took off his own hat and mopped

the top of his head. The centre of his skull, tidily bald, looked as though it had been dabbed with expensive furniture polish and rubbed for a long time with a soft yellow duster.

'Any way,' said Lillian, 'I've asked the Carraways.'

'Then I must have one of my own friends.'

'Now, Roly, for pity's sake . . . What's this one? I rather like this one.'

'Poison Ivy's the winner. I'll ask Desmond, then, shall I?'

'Roly, if you *dare* -'

'We'll see,' said Roly. 'All right, we'll see.'

Cook, not far away, looked raptly at the horses and made notes. The tiny man edged up.

'Excuse me, sir, it may not be of the smallest interest, but I have some lovely information about the last -'

Cook looked at him gravely. 'Not the smallest.'

'Well now, you see, recognizing a fellow Irishman -'

'What? How?'

'Doesn't an exile in a far land always know a fellow-countryman?'

Cook considered this. 'No. Not always.'

'I wonder, do you see, if you could maybe spare a -'

'What's this idea of yours about the last race?'

'I'll tell you, sir, I'll tell you. Could I see your card, now? Here we are -' He ran a square finger-nail down the list of horses. 'Ah, now, where is the name -?'

'You don't know anything about the last race,' said Cook sternly. 'How much do you want? Half a crown?'

'It's only as a loan, sir -'

'Ha.'

'I swear to God. Now you wouldn't miss a fiver -'

'Yes I would.'

'Not for a day or two.'

'Oh yes I would.'

'For a fellow Irishman in a spot of temporary trouble . . .' he broke off sharply and murmured, thunderstruck, 'will you look at that?'

Yellow Silk was going past them – Mario Montevarese's beautiful filly. Her ears were pricked and her face docile, and the sun rippled over her brilliant chestnut quarters.

'Yellow Silk,' said Cook. 'Looks nice. Rotten form. She hasn't got a chance.' He added, with kind seriousness: 'If you're short of money don't go backing that one. Go for the favourite.'

But the little Irishman was dazed. 'Wait till I see – ' He scurried away, wormed to a place by the rails farther along, and watched intently as the filly was being led past. Then he trotted back to Cook. 'This is not a possible thing!'

'What's the matter? Need a drink? I can run to a drink, if you like.'

'Oh wait till I see again,' said the Irishman, not hearing. 'She's turning there – can I look through those glasses?' Trembling with excitement he reached for Cook's race-glasses. Seeing Cook's shocked face he pleaded: 'Only a little look, now will you, please?'

Cook handed him the glasses: but, while he had them, kept a hand poised over the little man in case he bolted. But he gave them back after a long look. His hands were trembling. 'Lend me a little bit of money to back that one, and I swear to God you won't be sorry.'

'I swear to God I would,' said Cook mildly.

'I shouldn't have come,' muttered the Irishman, distraught. 'But I thought I'd risk it . . . Now will you please, for the love of God, lend me a little money to put on the chestnut filly?'

Cook turned to him kindly, patted his shoulder, and walked away. Half-way to the gate into the Members' he became aware that the Irishman, almost hysterical, was pattering after him.

'Wait just a minute – you're the only friendly man I've found in the whole land of England – just a few bob to put on the filly –'

'The shade,' said Cook. 'Find a nice seat in the shade.'

'She will win!'

'No, not possibly.'

'But she *will*.' The Irishman's intensity was terrible. 'I *know*.'

'How do you know?'

The Irishman glanced round at the thick, eddying crowd.

'I can't tell you, you see. I daren't tell.'

'Good-bye to you now,' said Cook. 'Good luck.'

The Irishman struggled along through the crowd beside him, plucking at his sleeve. 'Have a little bit on – a little bit for fun – and then if she wins give me a little bit of that . . . Isn't that fair?'

Cook stopped. 'Yes,' he said, thinking about it.

'She'll be any price you like! It's picking up money in the street!'

'Where shall I meet you? Here?'

The Irishman looked around again, nervously. 'I don't like this side. For I shouldn't have come, you know, at all. . . . Over there, maybe,' he pointed across the course, 'by the tent where it says Bass.'

Cook nodded, smiling kindly. 'If she wins I'll be there.'

'You don't believe me,' said the Irishman passionately.

'My dear fellow, what can you expect?'

'But you see' – he groped for words – 'there's that scar! As soon as I saw the scar I realized!'

'What scar?'

'A three-inch nail it was, horrible! The noise was like a gun going off!'

'Good-bye now. I must get my money on.'

'But she goes in the big race, you know, near Paris! The International one for the two-year old horses!'

'What big race?'

'They're calling it the General Charley something –'

'Prix du Général Charles de Gaulle,' said Cook. 'Know the one you mean. Nice race.'

'Listen, now. I know the winner of this race here and I know the winner of that Paris race! Now will you please, for the love of God –'

Cook waved affably and started away.

'Listen, sir, listen, will you please! You can make a lot of

money on that Paris race if you'll only just listen a minute -'

Cook stopped. 'Money?'

'There'll be a surprise in that Paris race! As soon as I saw this filly I realized!'

'You'd better have that drink,' said Cook.

'You still don't believe me! Listen, now, and I'll tell you why I think they done this. For years and years, so they tell me, it was Hock and Moselle, the two of them -'

'Hock and Moselle?'

'The two of them. Then came the trouble - Corkscrew, they called him -'

'Corkscrew.' Cook nodded, humouring this crazy man.

'And all these years, do you see, she's been burning up with the grudge!'

In the paddock the jockeys were getting ready to mount. Some were already up, walking their horses on to the course and then turning and cantering down towards the start. The crowd was streaming back to the stands, breaking round Cook and the Irishman like waves round a comic rock.

'Who?' said Cook. 'Burning up? What? What grudge?'

'Ah,' said the Irishman, 'it's terrible to think of. Listen now - when you see that Yellow Silk win today, then you'll know the winner of that Paris race!'

'Which one?' said Cook. 'Which one is the winner of the Paris race?'

'I forget what they call it. It's the one belongs to the pig-man.'

'The pig-man?' said Cook.

'I forget what they call him. But you won't get a bad price about 'm, see, for they'll all be thinking it's the other one will win!'

'See you later,' said Cook.

'I'm telling you, sir!'

Cook nodded, waved again, and hurried away.

'Where it says Bass,' called the Irishmen after him: then, suddenly scared, he looked round and edged away through the crowd.

The lad held Yellow Silk by the head and the jockey reached up.

'We don't want to give her a hard race,' said Jack. 'Only ride her out if you think she can do it.'

'Right, sir.'

Jack took his leg and hoisted him neatly into the tiny saddle. The jockey gathered the reins, pressed his heels into the filly, and walked her easily out on to the course.

'If she gets a place,' said Mario, 'I will be very happy.'

'I think, you know, she's better than you think.'

'So do I,' said the girl.

'You haven't seen her on a course.'

'You haven't seen her on the downs.'

'Change of air, maybe?' Mario shrugged and smiled. 'Let's hope so.'

They left the paddock and Mario and the girl wandered to the bottom of the lawn. They stood near the winning-post, leaning on the broad white rail, watching the horses go down to the start.

'Darling,' said Mario, 'I think we will be married in October.'

'What date in October?' said the girl, laughing with happiness.

'Well, the first?'

'The first!'

'Italy or England?'

'Italy.'

'England.'

'Are marriages nice in Italy?'

'Ours will be. Are marriages nice in England?'

'Ours will be.'

'Polly, I am so happy.'

'Mario, I am so happy.'

Yellow Silk went down in front of them, cantering easily, looking wonderful.

'There she is,' said Polly. 'Clever girl.'

'Pretty girl. Not very clever.'

'I've backed her, anyway.'

'Not much, I hope?'

'No, not much. But I would if I had it.'

'Truly, Polly, she is not much good.'

'Haven't you backed her?' asked Polly accusingly.

'Oh yes, a little bit. My horse, my only horse.'

Polly held up her hand, showing her engagement ring.

'Shall I pop this?'

'Pop?'

'Sell.'

'No, don't pop this. Not to back Yellow Silk.'

'All right. But she does look nice.'

'Well, sir,' said Laurie Love, 'this is the one you was waiting for.'

'Poison Ivy?' said Cook, raising his voice against the appalling din of hundreds of shouted prices.

'I'll take five to four, Major.'

'Odds on?'

'Nobody don't want nothing else.'

'I'll have. . . .' Cook wavered in an indecision which surprised Laurie. the old boy generally knew exactly what he wanted.

'Take one anderarf Poison,' shouted the bookies.

'I'll have. . . .' said Cook. 'What price Yellow Silk?'

'Any price you like, sir.'

'I'll have. . . .'

'Take seven to four Poison,' shouted the bookies.

'I'll . . . Hm. . . .' Cook chewed his lower lip, rubbed the strap of his race-glasses, and stared at the sky and then the ground. 'Twenties Yellow Silk?'

'To what sum, Major?'

'Oh, just a hundred to five.'

'Right, sir. George, that's twenty fivers, Major Cook, Yellow Silk to win.'

'I must be mad,' said Cook.

'Information, Major?'

'Yes . . . no! I once had a dog called Yellow Silk.'

'A dog, sir?'

'I mean a canary. She sang *Traviata*. I was very fond of her. Silly of me, having this sort of bet. Still, if you forget your friends, where are you?'

He potted to a seat on the lawn and pulled his heavy old race-glasses out of their battered case.

At the start the horses were circling round. One or two were taken up by their jockeys to look at the tapes: 'Remember? Nothing to be frightened of.' The starter's assistant was tightening girths. The jockeys called to each other intermittently and obscenely.

On the other side of the course – the free, free-and-easy side – a uniformed band cheerfully plodded along the front of the beer-tents, past the half-crown enclosure, turning at the Gents' and stumping back. Another band finished glasses of beer, wiped their mouths and their brows, and launched into 'Colonel Bogey'. Cockney family parties shouted to each other, though a bare three feet apart, and betted freely with rolls of fivers. West Indians grinned, loose-limbed and happy in the sun. Distressed gentlefolk, in tight sad groups, consulted the *Daily Telegraph* and queued at the four-shilling Tote.

In the middle of all this fun an incongruous figure stood: a burly, nondescript man in an ill-fitting black suit. He carried sandwich-boards which read 'Your God Is A Jealous God' and 'None Shall Escape His Wrath'. He stood near a bookie's board, his broad smooth face expressionless, watching everywhere. Presently he was joined by another man in ill-fitting black, who wore a bowler hat and whose sandwich-boards read 'Beware Beware' and 'There Shall Be A Wailing'. They whispered, then walked through the crowd, searching.

Twenty yards away the little Irishman sat by himself in a corner of the beer tent. He took a long pull of his Guinness, then looked about him with rapid green eyes. He huddled into his mackintosh, in spite of the damp heat in the tent.

He lit a Weight, but let it smoulder forgotten in his fingers. He knew he had said too much. Because he needed a little money, to keep alive and keep running, he had said too much. It was a terrible risk. He was frightened.

Roly shook off his sister in the crush at the gate into the Members'. Liberated, he sauntered into Tattersalls' and backed Poison Ivy – heavily, for him: fourteen shillings to win eight. On the lawn he saw Desmond Cook again.

'Hi, Desmond!'

Cook was thinking: ridiculous nonsense. I must be mad. I haven't got so many fivers I can throw them away on gibberish tips about corkscrews. But if there *is* something in it, if there *is* something in it. . . .

'Hi, Desmond!' said Roly again.

Not so much, thought Cook, this little race here. But if there's something funny in that big French race, and if that little man knows what he says he knows. . . .

Roly grasped Cook's elbow and pumped it backwards and forwards. 'Desmond, Desmond!' He rapped his knuckles on Cook's race-glasses, as though demanding entry. 'Hi, Desmond!'

Cook emerged from his dreams. 'What?'

'Come and stay for Goodwood.'

'Really? That's very kind of you, Roly.'

'Settled, then.'

The two old men beamed at each other.

'Here, wait a minute,' said Cook, struck by a thought. 'What about your sister?'

'What about her?'

'Don't think she cares for me.'

'Oh *yes*, Desmond, she *does*.'

'Ah, good.' Cook nodded, and seemed about to enter his private world of high finance and form-figures.

But Roly felt like chatting. 'Got much on the favourite, Desmond?'

'No. No, not much.'

'Why not, for God's sake? Short-priced certainty, just your mark.'

'Had another think.'

'And I took your word for it! Have you gone and found one to beat it?'

'No . . . No, I suppose not. It's a funny thing, though' – he looked at his friend seriously – 'you don't often meet a fellow as certain as that. There could be something in it. He's frightened to death, I don't know why. Talked a lot of gibberish. Nice little man – I hope he wins.'

'This is only the fourth race, Desmond.'

'I know, I know.' Cook smiled mildly. 'I'm still in command of my faculties.'

The white flag went up, six furlongs away, and the excited young horses moved raggedly towards the start.

'*They're off,*' boomed the loudspeaker. '*Poison Ivy breaks fast and is the first to show, followed by Light Bulb, Brass Polish, Arabella, Yellow Silk in the middle –*'

Mario and Polly stood excitedly by the finish.

'*Three furlongs to run,*' boomed the loudspeaker, '*and it's Poison Ivy by a length, Arabella, Brass Polish, Yellow Silk, Snap-dragon –*'

The Princess, poker-faced, stood high in the back of the stands with Pierino.

'*Passing the two-furlong marker it's still Poison Ivy well clear, Arabella, Yellow Silk going easily, Brass Polish falling back –*'

On the opposite side of the course, on the rails near the finish, the tiny Irishman stood agog. He muttered encouragement, jiggling up and down.

'*Coming into the final furlong,*' came the noise of the loudspeaker faintly, '*and Yellow Silk has come up to join Poison Ivy, these two well clear –*'

The two massive sandwich-men came quietly up each side of the Irishman.

‘A hundred yards to go,’ said the television commentator, his voice rising and accelerating, ‘and Yellow Silk takes it up – she’s drawing clear – two lengths, two and a half – and at the line it’s Yellow Silk – well, what a shock, this is certainly eat your words department, haha – ’

‘Good God,’ said Cook. ‘He was right.’

3

THERE was a great noise from the crowd, still hopelessly shouting in Poison Ivy.

'What sort of a rotten tip was that?' asked Roly crossly.

'He *said* he knew,' said Cook wonderingly. 'He said he *knew*. If he's right about that, why shouldn't he be right about the other?'

'Couldn't be beaten, you said. Cut and dried, open and shut, all over bar the shouting. If you're ever going to buy that house of yours you'd better change your system.'

'House? Yes, house. . . . You know, Roly, I think I am going to buy my house.'

'What you can buy is a drink for me, after that.'

'Yes, of course, certainly Roly. I've just got to go over there, where it says Bass.'

'Why, for God's sake?'

'Getting another tip like that one. Coming?'

'Certainly not. You'll find me in the bar.'

'The bar. Good.' Cook nodded and hurried to the gate on to the course.

His route intersected that of Mario and Polly, themselves hurrying to the unsaddling enclosure and beaming with excitement.

'You see?' Polly said, 'we told you!'

'I don't believe it,' said Mario. 'Your brother must be the best trainer in Europe!'

'Of course he is, darling. Come and tell him so.'

Yellow Silk and the placed horses were being dismounted, steaming, and patted and praised. Jack Curtis waved happily to Mario and Polly.

'You see, Mario?' said Jack.

'She's a different animal,' said Mario. 'What have you done to her?'

Cook put on his hat. 'Good-bye,' he said politely. He turned and walked stiffly down the lane.

A stable lad laughed. The string moved forward again. Cook was muddy and chilled. He walked fast to get warm, and slept heavily on the train to London.

COOK changed his clothes with relief. He considered having a bath, but he had never had a bath before lunch and would have felt uncomfortable doing so. He remembered, with pleasure, that he was staying with Roly this week for Goodwood. So he packed a few clothes into his large and grotesquely heavy suitcase, and gave the camera and tripod back to his landlady. Then, since he was catching an afternoon train to Sussex, he went to Blazon's for lunch.

After lunch he took the new *Country Life* into the telephone-box in the hall and surreptitiously tore out two pages of advertisements for houses.

'Really,' said a member crossly, seeing him at it through the glass door of the telephone-box, 'somebody ought to say something to the secretary.'

'Somebody does, every six or eight years,' said another member. 'You, as a rule, isn't it?'

'I like reading those pages.'

'You've got a house. You don't need them.'

'Desmond can't afford a house. He doesn't need them.'

'It's his hobby, Charles. You collect Spode, Desmond collects advertisements for houses. Don't be small-minded.'

'Oh very well, very well. But why can't he get his pictures out of old *Country Lives*?'

'Lives.'

'Lives. Really? Lives. Lives. Country Lives. Are you sure? It sounds wrong.'

'Grammar.'

'Yes? It sounds wrong.'

Cook emerged, tucking the stolen pages into his pocket and humming innocently. Anyone who saw him at this moment, for the first time, would have known that he was guilty of some recent, serious misdemeanour.

'Besides,' said the first member, 'I hate those tatty bits where he's torn them out. Those damned torn bits.'

'You're being small-minded, Charles.'

'Thank God you've come,' said Roly at Midhurst Station. 'This party we've got is absolutely terrible.'

It was, Cook found. So very soon after dinner the two of them left the drawing-room (an argument was being conducted, in bitter, reasonable voices, about Baroque) and went to play ping-pong in an outhouse. They played for sixpence a game. Roly, who practised constantly, won the first two. But Cook outsmarted him in the third with a series of very slow, heavily cut, lobby shots which made Roly angry and put him off.

'Come on,' he said, 'let's have a drink. You don't play properly.'

'Change of pace,' said Cook. 'Outgeneralled.'

'Not very sporting, Desmond.'

'Bad loser? What? Bad loser?'

'Yes, always have been. Hate losing. Come on.'

'Do we,' said Cook nervously, 'have to go back and listen to all that talk?'

'No no. I've got some whisky in my study.'

'Have you got a study?' asked Cook, impressed.

'Of course I've got a study.'

'What for?'

'It's where I play my gramophone.'

They played the 'Blue Danube' and then some jiggling records new to Cook. These brought Roly back to cheerfulness.

'Isn't it superb?' he said. 'I'll put that one on again, shall I?'

'What is it?'

'The Theme Music of the Rovin' Cowhand. ITV. We'll watch it tomorrow. Magnificent. All over the prairies, and the Indians attack, or bad hombres, or one thing and another. By the way, have you found out any more about your tip for the Charles de Gaulle?'

'Hard to say. There's something funny about that filly that won at Ascot.'

'Yellow Belly.'

'Yellow Silk. And there's a girl who knows something about that.'

'Have you asked her?'

'We're not on those terms. But there's something there, something. . . . And there's an Italian fellow who blinked a bit when I talked about Hock and Moselle.'

'Ah, Desmond, getting warm!'

'Yes, I feel that. I feel that, yes.'

'Why did the Italian fellow blink?'

'That I can't say.'

'Ask him?'

'He wasn't in the mood. Just had his heart broken.'

'Really? Poor chap. Why?'

'My fault, I'm afraid.'

'My dear Desmond, what have you been doing?'

'Scouting about. Fun, in a way.'

'And you're getting somewhere?'

'Sometimes I think so. Sometimes not.'

'I wish you luck.'

'Thank you, Roly,' said Cook gravely. 'Thank you very much.'

The next day, at Goodwood, under a blazing but less enervating sun, Cook lost two hundred pounds on the Stewards' Cup (a wild bet caused by lunch) and then had a thousand on the next winner at even money. This put him, altogether, thirty-one hundred up.

After dinner, drunk and sleepy, he and Roly watched the television in the dining-room. Dinner had been dainty, so they ate cocktail biscuits and salted almonds, thus giving themselves thirsts and so becoming drunker. In the first quarter-hour of the programme the Roving Cowhand, very slowly, took a job as ramrod of a big spread called the Sleepy Q. Then there was a batch of commercials, which astonished Cook.

'Bore,' apologized Roly.

'What? Rather gay. What's that woman doing?'

'The chap's shirt is whiter.'

'My God, *so it is*. Remarkable. I call that remarkable.'

'All tricks.'

'No. Surely not. Really?' Cook was shocked. 'Government should intervene.'

'Hush,' said Roly.

The Roving Cowhand ran into trouble. The second quarter-hour ended badly for him.

'Look for *your* new Cliptoys in every sunshine-packed box of Brekkiflake,' said the television aggressively.

*'Cliptoys,
Cliptoys,
In every Brekkiflake!'*

'Cliptoys?' said Cook.

'You make them. The bits are in the packet and you clip them together and make toys.'

'Rather fun.'

'Tremendous fun.'

*'Cliptoys,
Cliptoys,
For every child to make!'*

Cook was asleep by the end of the third quarter of the programme. Roly watched the rest alone, following the action with frowning attention.

The following afternoon Cook lost two thousand pounds in three bets.

'As to the Spanish character *per se*,' said Mr Carraway after dinner, 'allow me, if you will, to tell you a little story about an experience we had some years ago -'

'Reverting, Lillian,' said Mrs Carraway, cutting him off mercilessly, 'to our conversation of two nights ago -'

'The Spanish,' said Miss Linden, 'have an austerity of

approach which, to me – but you may think me overly impressionable – ’

‘Between Barcelona and – ’

‘While C. A. Lejeune is obsessed, I grant, with – ’

‘Always think of myself as a *wide-eyed* traveller – ’

‘Come on, Desmond,’ said Roly, ‘Stockwhip.’

‘What?’

‘Splendid programme. Guns.’

Cook, numbed by his losses, sat sadly in front of the television screen as he had sat sadly through dinner.

*‘Cliptoys,
Cliptoys,
In every Brekkiflake – ’*

On the next day, Thursday, Cook had mixed luck. On the first four races he lost two hundred, won four, won five, and lost two. This put him five hundred up on the day and brought him back to sixteen hundred up altogether.

He saw Polly Curtis and tried to hide. But do what he might his head stuck up above other nearby heads and she looked at him with anger and dislike.

After dinner he and Roly played ping-pong for a fiver a game. In the first Roly found an answer to Cook’s gentle spins: he gently spun them back and reduced Cook to whacking the table, fruitlessly, inches from the ball. But in the next two Cook developed and perfected a counter-weapon: very high shots which passed out of the light into the deep shadows of the roof before plummeting back. Many of these struck the edge of the table glancingly and flew, irretrievably, under the deck-chairs stacked against the wall. Soon there was only one cracked ball left. Roly refused to play with this, so they listened to the gramophone in his study and went singing to bed.

On Friday, the last day of Goodwood, no favourite won in the six races. Cook, mercifully, had only one bet: the second favourite in the first, which won at six to one.

The rich woods and the great downs glowed in the sun, and faces everywhere were pink or brick or brown.

Cook saw Polly Curtis again: close to, this time, in the bar with her brother. Her face and arms were a wonderful gold. He was the reddest of bricks. She looked sadder (Cook thought) than she usually looked. He hoped this was not his doing: but, if it was, it was interesting.

He pulled his hat (his usual hat) uselessly down to hide his face and drank his brandy and soda.

Polly saw him at once. She looked at him, worrying, and made abstracted answers to Jack's chatter.

That horrible snoop sly old man, with his ginny veiny face and his revolting hat. How much did he know? What was he after? Obviously he hadn't seen Yellow Silk properly, or he wouldn't have hidden like a great grey worm in the ditch. But obviously he suspected, or he wouldn't have come poking about with his imitation camera. He knew about the scar. And he'd talked about a three-inch nail, so he knew the way it had happened. What else did he know? What would he do? What would happen to Jack?

And Mario! It was Mario's doing! Polly had cried for a long time on that awful Sunday afternoon, but that was all got rid of now and she felt nothing for Mario but loathing and contempt.

After dinner Cook and Roly watched Panhandle, a fast-moving story about cattle-rustling, impenetrably obscure to Cook. Roly explained it as it went along.

'You see, *they* don't realize *this* chap's the crook.'

'But this chap's the lawyer.'

'Always the crook, always.'

'Good God.'

End of Part One.

*'Cliptoys,
Cliptoys,
In every Brekkiflake!'*

Cook sat gently celebrating. Goodwood finished, and he

had ended up a little, but only a little, below his score when it started. This had never happened before. Hock and Moselle. . . .

The bangs and crashes of the story and Roly's excited commentary flowed past him. He drank a lot of whisky and thought, cloudily, about a neat white house with orchards and paddocks and a mile of gin-clear trout-stream.

Presently Panhandle came to an affecting end and Roly, staggering a little, walked over to the television set and switched it off.

'I want to make a Cliptoy,' said Cook.

'What a good idea.'

'You got the stuff?'

'Brekki flakes? Let's go and look.'

In the larder they found one half-full and two unopened packets of Brekki flake. Each was nearly two feet high, and the printing on the cardboard trumpeted the presence, inside, of Cliptoys. Cook took the half-full packet and peered in.

'Force,' he said. 'It's just Force.'

'No, new sort.'

'Very nice,' said Cook, nibbling a flake.

'Very.'

'Can't see any Cliptoys.'

'Empty it out.'

'All right.'

Cook upended the packet and golden flakes of cereal showered over the kitchen linoleum. Last of all a cellophane envelope fluttered out.

'Ha!'

They bent over the kitchen table, their feet crunching in Brekki flakes. Roly tried to take the cellophane envelope but after a brief struggle Cook kept it and tore it open.

'Remind you I'm your guest,' he said sternly.

He tried to clip the Cliptoy together, but it defeated him.

'That bit goes in *there*,' said Roly.

'But it's got this blob.'

'That's the clip.'

'Clip? Clip? Clip?'

'Let me, Desmond. *Please let me.*'

At last Cook let him, and Roly put a small plastic helicopter together quite quickly.

'You've practised,' said Cook.

'Mechanical ability.'

'Common thing to have,' said Cook crossly. 'I want to do one.'

'Open another packet.'

So Cook tore open one of the new packets.

'Go on,' said Roly.

Cook emptied it over the table. 'We can sweep it up and put it back,' he explained.

'*Very good idea.*'

After a long, anxious struggle Cook assembled a pink aeroplane. He held it up proudly, and then swooped it to and fro with zooming noises.

'My turn,' said Roly, and opened and emptied another packet.

His Cliptoy was a ship, and difficult. They studied the parts together, Brekkiflakes clinging to their hands and arms and legs.

Roly's sister came in suddenly. They faced her, frightened. Cook cleared his throat and shifted his feet, crunching and pulverizing the flakes on the floor. Then Roly began to take handfuls of flakes and put them back into a packet. After a moment Cook started to help him.

AT Epsom on Saturday Cook had a horrible hot time and lost four hundred. He had left Roly's house, in disgrace, in the early morning, and lunched off fruit cake at Waterloo Station. He had a headache which grew worse through the afternoon. When he got home he lay on his bed with his handkerchief over his eyes.

On Sunday he felt better. He went for a walk, wrote a poem about ducks, and played his records of Caruso, Scotti, and Galli-Curci on his old hand-cranked Victrola.

In the early evening, as usual, he spent an hour on his homework from St Hildreth's Correspondence College. It was Lesson 16, Poultry. When he had finished it he lay back, eyes closed, and saw white geese waddling over a smooth meadow beside a stream, turkeys and guinea-fowl pecking at scientific feeders, and new-laid eggs – tiny and brown and freckled – coming to his breakfast-table every morning.

On Monday the weather was cool and showery, but the bank holiday crowds were packed like pilchards both sides of the course at Epsom. Cook backed a horse in the third race at four hundred pounds to win nine, and saw it get home by a head in the slanting rain.

At Brighton on Tuesday it was wetter still. Not enough rain to soften the iron-hard going, but enough to make it skiddy and treacherous on top – enough to upset the form. Cook had one small losing bet and went home soaked and sober.

On Wednesday he sipped his second cup of coffee and looked at the streaming windows. He almost decided not to go to Brighton. But he thought, padding about in his slippers and rustling *The Times*: only six weeks to the Charles de Gaulle. He thought: must get a stake together for the

last big bet. So he got out his greenish umbrella, caught the train, and lost five hundred pounds.

On the third and last day he had bets on the first three races. He lost two hundred, then won five hundred and then a thousand. Thirteen hundred up on the day, thirty-three hundred up altogether.

'Lumme,' said Laurie Love's clerk on the rails, huddling under the huge umbrella.

'Don't worry, George,' said Laurie. 'Tomorrow's Newmarket, right? And the next day. Then there's Sandown, Newbury, York, right? Des is doing very nice today but we'll have it back, don't worry.'

'Lumme,' said George, 'I hope so.'

When Cook reached his flat he went to sleep, without meaning to, awkwardly across a chair, and woke up stiff and sneezing at a quarter past seven. He put mustard in his bath and decided to have some hot whisky and water when he went to bed. For he was going to Newmarket the next day, staying with Sammy Masters for the two-day meeting. This was an arrangement made weeks before at Windsor. Cook was sadly aware that Sammy's wife had bitterly opposed it at the time and ever since, but Sammy had insisted. Nice of Sammy.

The weather at Newmarket was better but still bad. Cook won eighteen hundred pounds. He spent Sunday reading the *News of the World*, not speaking at meals, and trying to be invisible when Sammy's wife was in the room. She had, herself, lost one pound three on the meeting; she was extremely put out by Cook's winnings. There was nothing, Cook saw, he could do about this, except pretend to be clean and sober.

He went back to London on Monday (missing racing for the day) and put in three bewildered hours on Lesson 17 from St Hildreth's: Chemistry. Doing his exercise at the end he cheated, for the very first time. His feeling of guilt lasted all through dinner.

On Tuesday morning he pushed his breakfast-tray as far down the bed as he could with his hands, then eased it.

farther down by jiggling his knees and then his feet. The coffee cup lurched, wobbled, and recovered. The top fell off the sugar bowl with a small, appalling crash. The neat, scooped crown of his boiled egg toppled delicately off the egg-plate, hit the raised edge of the tray, and fell on to the old blue blanket. Cook tried to reach it, straining forward as he sat, in the manner of a man doing slimming exercises. He touched it with the tip of a finger: but it danced away out of his reach.

'Curse you,' he said aloud. He leant back and drew up his thin old knees. Thereafter, when he moved, the egg-shell swung and slithered like a lonely coracle on the billows of a huge blue sea.

He thought about his killing on the Charles de Gaulle, parading his clues for inspection as, once, he had paraded soldiers in bearskins and scarlet. Tallest on the right, shortest on the left. Number one (right marker): Yellow Silk had won at Ascot when it was impossible that she should do so. The little Irishman had known she would, by something he observed about her which astonished and frightened him. Then he had been laid out and carted off. Memo: those holy sandwich-men might give a bit more help. Hock and Moselle. Meant something, perhaps, to that young Italian. Memo: try it on him again and watch him closely. Scar, three-inch nail. Meant something to the Curtis girl. Probably related to Yellow Silk. Memo: query possibility of getting anything out of Curtis girl? Query possibility of having another look at Yellow Silk. Pig-man. Grudge. Corkscrew. Meant damn all to anybody.

The thought of going to Gunn's Lodge again filled him with fear and distaste. He must approach the problem from another direction. Cross-bearing. Recce.

He pondered, frowning.

Tired lines sagged from his eyes and the corners of his mouth. One sparse bunch of sandy hair stuck up from the back of his head; over his ears whiter tufts straggled like wind-blown thistledown. He wriggled his head to get comfortable against the topmost of his four pillows, stared un-

seeing round his bedroom (comfortable, long-familiar, not much loved), and knotted his hands round his knees.

On the bedside table, to his left, lay *Raceform* and the *Collected Poems of Tennyson*. The bedside lamp was converted from a heavy brass candlestick. Above it, in a pearwood frame, hung a print of a Corporal of Pomeranian Hussars in the uniform of 1830: the one survivor of a set that had hung in his bedroom when he was a child. Beyond the door was his dressing-table. On it lay an almost hairless silver-backed hairbrush (one of a pair he had been given for his twenty-first birthday); a shiny new clothes-brush; a stud-box he had been given when he was somebody's best man in 1923; a pile of form books; a pair of spurs; and an enormous faggot of pencils, the harvest of years. Above hung *Bend Or*, magnificent in a gold surround but stained in an upper corner. Beyond stood his wardrobe, with room for fifty suits. He had six suits: morning dress, tails and dinner-jacket, all made before the first war, and three others made soon after it. Beyond again, under the window, stood a shoe-rack: room for twenty pairs and exactly full. All his shoes were thick, black, and very shiny. He had bought one pair a year, from Lobb, from 1919 until 1939, when it had seemed patriotic to stop. Near the window was his wash-basin, with tooth-brushes, nail-brushes, pumice stone and razor – the razor he had bought for fourpence, in Folkestone in 1931. Some years ago someone had given him a shiny new one for Christmas, elegantly wrapped in celluloid and plastic. He had never undone it; it lay on a shelf of his wardrobe, dun with dust.

Meanwhile, he thought, he had got his winnings up to £5,100. Very nice but not enough. If there was something fishy in the Charles de Gaulle (and there was! and there was!) and if he found out about it (and he would! and he would!) then somebody else would know about it too – whoever was working it. Perhaps the owner, perhaps not. That meant a lot of money on it. That meant a short price. That meant Cook's bet must be at least £10,000. Say, three to one. £30,000.

He yawned and stretched, spread-eagled on his pillows. The sun had long ago left his window and the bedroom was very dark. He switched on the bedside light and took the volume of Tennyson. Marking his place (near the end of the 'Idylls of the King') there was a piece he had torn out of *The Times*: the runners for the Charles de Gaulle. Julep, Canasta, Tancredo, Larksong, Toffee-Apple, Phoenix Park, Perelandra, Lucky Jim, Christo, Late Frost. An interesting thing would be the betting: if one was heavily backed already it might be a pointer to something. Were they betting yet? The race was five weeks off: they might be.

Cook chewed his big pink knuckles, thinking, and then padded next door into his sitting-room. He stared at his list of bookmakers and presently dialled a number.

'Cavendish and Carroll, good morning.'

'I want to speak to Mr Carroll.'

'Who is that speaking, please?'

'Cook.'

'Just one moment, please - '

The telephone clerk buzzed his director.

'Major Cook for you, Mr Carroll.'

'Christ,' said 'Gaudy' Carroll. 'O.K., put him on.'

He was the sharpest dresser in the National Sporting League and his office was perhaps the ugliest. He smoked fat Egyptian cigarettes, had nude ladies on his braces, and had once, years before, taken Cook home and put him to bed after an evening meeting at Ally Pally.

He picked up the telephone. 'Carroll?'

'Morning, Gaudy. Cook speaking.'

'Ah, Major, good morning sir. Haven't heard your voice for a long time.'

'No? No, possibly not. Gaudy, you know this Charles de Gaulle thing?'

'Longchamp, Sunday, September 20th. Difficult race, or.'

'Made a book?'

'Hardly, sir. Which horse had you in mind?'

'Ah,' said Cook, sounding wise. 'Money going on?'

'No doubt of that, Major, no doubt at all. Where I couldn't tell you off-hand - I personally haven't laid a bet on the race. It's early days, sir, early days -'

'Well, look here, Gaudy . . . hm. Interested to know where the money's going -'

'Good question, Major, wise precaution, sir. I'm interested myself. I'll ask some of our friends in the profession. There won't be an official call-over, not for a week or two yet -'

'No, no. Like an indication, though -'

'Just so, Major, exactly so. Will you be at Sandown, sir?'

'Yes,' said Cook sadly.

'Then I'll see you there and tell you what I can.'

'Good of you, Gaudy, thank you.'

Gaudy pursed his big wet lips as he put the telephone down. Had the old love got a horse? If he had it might be a good one - there was nothing wrong with his judgement when he was sober. Gaudy hoped he had a good one. It was sad seeing a tired old buster go on and on, hoping hoping hoping, getting nicely up and then skidding down. . . . That night, in the taxi back from Ally Pally, Gaudy had heard Cook's dreams - a long bass mumble about houses and rose trees. He was quite right, poor old sweetie - he ought to be squatting nice and quiet in the country.

Gaudy sighed, and began making telephone calls to friends of his.

Half-way through the second day of Sandown, Cook was three hundred down. Leave it there, he thought. Don't make it worse.

The crowd was streaming down the hill from the paddock to the Tote and the bookies and the grandstand; on the narrow tan path beside the asphalt the horses for the fourth race were delicately stepping down towards the course.

Drink? thought Cook. He looked at the horses appraisingly - from habit, and not because he was interested. Yes,

drink. He turned decisively towards the bar above the Tote Investors' building.

'Major,' called a fruity voice.

'Ah, Gaudy, afternoon. Have a drink.'

Gaudy's news was rather sparse. There was money for nearly every runner in the Charles de Gaulle.

'So it don't help us much, eh, Major?'

'Not much,' said Cook, vexed.

'And, see,' said Gaudy, waving his Farouk-sized cigarette, 'far as my mates can tell, the money for the French one is French money, get it? And the money for the Swedish one's Swedish, get it? All very natural.'

'Owners,' said Cook.

'That's it, Major, you've hit it, sir. Owners all over backing their own. Trainers maybe. Owners' aunts and mums and grannies. All very natural, nothing to help us. But -'

'Yes? Yes? Yes?'

'We got a call-over on the Ebor tonight at the Victoria Club.'

'Ebor? York meeting's when?'

'Next *week*, Major.'

'Good God, so it is.'

'I must say,' said Gaudy, 'for a racing man you got a wild idea of the calendar.'

'Live from day to day.'

'And hand to mouth, sir. Har har,' laughed Gaudy fatly, 'har har.'

'Ha,' said Cook, unamused. 'In a sense,' he added, seeing Gaudy was right.

'Well, Major, be at Newbury tomorrow, sir?'

'Yes,' said Cook, thinking with despair of his hour and a half each way in the train.

'I *knew* it. My guess, now, is there'll be some bigger money for the French race this evening. When we done talking about the Ebor, see? Might help us.'

'Might.'

'All be in the papers, if so.'

'Yes, but,' said Cook, 'you can find out where the money's from?'

'Could do,' said Gaudy, 'could do.'

Cook smiled. 'Thank you, Gaudy. Very much indeed.'

He sucked at his brandy and soda.

Dear old crumb, thought Gaudy. Help him all I can.

The hour and a half to Newbury seemed seven and a half, the seat stone, the air dirty and empty of oxygen. Cook, getting out stiffly, thought with horror of the journey back.

But on the course he cheered up, and won four hundred on the second.

After the third he met Gaudy.

'The two they want, Major - '

'Two?'

'Two. Larksong and Toffee-Apple.'

'Hm. Larksong's Italian.'

'Italian-bred. Trained there. American owns it.'

'Her.'

'Filly, Major, quite correct, sir.'

'And Toffee-Apple is, hm, Irish.'

'Irish colt, correct again, Major. But another American been and bought him.'

'Get all the best ones.'

'*Don't* they, sir, *don't* they? The long purse. Well, good luck to them - nice-behaved people.'

'So what did you finish with? Joint favourites?'

'Near enough, Major. Larksong nine to two. Toffee-Apple fives.'

'Ridiculous prices.'

'Quite, sir. For a race that's five weeks off they're robbery. Still, that's where the money's going and you can't get a soul to lay you better.'

'Any others?'

'Dribbles, sir. The feeling at the Club last night - '

'Yes? Yes? Yes?'

'The opinion is, the race is between those two Yanks. Best of their age in Europe, people think. This Larksong – run once. Rome. Walked it. Record time. They're talking her up for the Oaks. And this Toffee-Apple – run once. Leopardstown. Walked it. Near record time. Bloke last night wanted to back him for the Guineas, but he couldn't find a layer.'

'Good God.'

'Good horses, Major, real class. You don't have to look much farther.'

'Probably not.'

Probably not, thought Cook on the train.

Toffee-Apple. Trained by T. O'Mara on The Curragh. Owned by Mr Dickinson Lough of Chicago – '*whose horses,*' said an evening paper, '*have taken some valuable prizes in the Middle West.*'

Larksong. Trained by P. Perotti near Turin. Owned by Mrs Wilmington of New York City – '*one of the most colourful recruits to racing,*' said the same article, '*for many years, on the other side of the Atlantic.*'

These people were backing their own horses, no doubt. And their stables, and their friends, and a lot of other people who knew how good the animals were. '*... comes as no surprise,*' said the article, '*to learn that only short prices are available about these two. Everyone who saw Toffee-Apple trounce some respectable opposition over the minimum distance at Leopardstown last month knew they were in the presence of a champion. And all who witnessed, as I did, the way Larksong made hacks of her opponents six weeks ago at Rome. . . .*'

Yes. Very straightforward. Very disappointing.

Toffee-Apple was to have one more race in Ireland before the Charles de Gaulle. Larksong had had a minor interruption of training and would go, they thought, straight to Longchamp. The other runners? '*... hard to see,*' said the article, '*how any of these honest but unspectacular performers can live with the two American-owned cracks. . . .*'

Cook yawned and longed for a drink. Presently he dug in

his pockets and spread on his knees a sheaf of cuttings from *Country Life*.

'Desmond!' said Roly. 'By God you got me in bad.'

'Whose fault was that?'

'Yours.'

'Yours.'

'Yours.'

They both laughed.

'This is my nephew Ralph,' said Roly, 'and this is his wife Pamela.'

'Nephew?'

'Jock's son.'

'Jock?'

'My brother.'

'Ah, your brother Jock. I'm with you, Roly, with you. Come and have a drink. *All* of you.'

It was Saturday, the second day of the Newbury meeting. Cook, seven hundred up on the day and eleven hundred up on the meeting, felt expansive.

Champagne?'

'You don't like champagne.'

'But *you do*.'

'Have brandy.'

'Really? All right. Yes, better for me.'

'How's your big tip, Desmond?'

Cook told him Gaudy's news. 'This American fellow,' he finished, 'and this American woman. They own the best ones and they're backing them. All perfectly honest. Sickening.'

'Larksong,' said Roly's nephew. 'That's Robin DeFoe's.'

'Belongs to a Mrs Wilmington.'

'Better known as Robin DeFoe.'

'Who the hell's Robin DeFoe?'

'*What?*' cried Roly's nephew's wife, forbidding in a royal blue mohair beret. 'You've never heard of Robin DeFoe?'

'Writer?' hazarded Cook.

'Only of advertisements.'

'Don't follow you. Sorry.'

'Empress of corsetry,' said Roly's nephew. 'A great woman. Ah, there are the Loudons, dear. We must go and talk to the Loudons.'

Cook and Roly were left together.

'Thank God,' said Roly, 'respice. I'm staying with them and I'm going mad. Do you know, they haven't even got a television? I couldn't even see the Roving Cowhand.'

'Rotten,' said Cook.

'This news of yours,' said Roly, 'these two horses that all the money's going on -'

'Yes?'

'You ought to find out a bit more about them. One of the owners may be crooked, for instance. Probably that American suspender-belt woman.'

'Robinson Crusoe.'

'Robin DeFoe. Possibly they're backing the animal like mad now, and then making sure it wins later.'

'How?'

'Dirty work of some kind. Or, Desmond, perhaps they're going to make sure the horse *doesn't* win.'

'Then why are they backing it?'

'Ah, I can't tell you that. Up to you to find out.'

'Yes,' said Cook, 'perhaps you're right.'

'Get alongside these owners.'

'I *will*. How do you mean, alongside?'

'Get to know them. Sound them out.'

'I *will*.'

£5,900, thought Cook, stretching his legs across the compartment. That's where we are and a very nice start.

'Ow.' The plump girl opposite gave a tiny, ladylike scream.

'I beg your pardon.' Cook looked at her with contrition. 'Did I kick you?'

'Just a teeny bit.'

'Very clumsy,' he said, 'forgive me.'

'Granted.'

'Snout?' said her Ronnie, offering the Rothman's Kingsize.

'No, ta,' she said. Ronnie had a lot to learn.

She smiled at the old man, forgiving him. He smiled back and she felt all warm.

They rattled through a grim suburb and Cook read his evening paper. *Summer Strike? Railmen Meet. Pop Singer In Court. Damages For M.P. Emir Flies In. Model Flies Out. Crisis In Theatreland. Tragedy In Acton. Party of Century?*

Cook glanced out of the window, saddened by all these disasters, and then bent wearily back to the paragraph on the social page.

PARTY OF CENTURY?

The celebrated Miss Robin DeFoe, corsetière supreme, is giving one of her fabulous parties tonight. She has taken a house for the occasion. Location is close secret, but I can reveal that it is 16 Hyde Park Circle. Miss DeFoe's parties are legendary, but tonight's promises to be the most spectacular yet. Horse-racing is the theme - Miss DeFoe's latest and greatest enthusiasm.

PRINTS GIVE INSPIRATION.

Oswald Caunter has designed the décor. Said Mr Caunter to our reporter this morning: 'I have taken as my inspiration some wonderful old prints of English race-courses in the nineteenth century. It has been a challenge.' There will, we hear, be a race-course installed, complete with starter, judge, and bookmakers. A lot of money, we gather, may be expected to change hands. What exactly is to be raced is not, however, yet revealed. Says Miss DeFoe: 'Surprise!' We confess to a lively curiosity.

What would you race, thought Cook, in a house in Hyde Park Circle? Beetles? Frogs? People on their hands and knees? He too felt a lively curiosity. Besides, this absurdly-named woman owned Larksong, one of the favourites in the Charles de Gaulle. As Roly said, he ought to check up on her.

Fleas, could it be? Spiders? Newts?

COOK's dinner-jacket had, of course, started black. In the thirties it had become green. Now it was an uneasy, inconsistent red. But it was very clean and very well pressed: for he was, in certain limited ways, a fastidious man. Wearing it, and with an ample satin bow-tie slightly askew, he climbed out of a taxi at 16 Hyde Park Circle. He rang the bell, and a Maltese in hunting pink let him into a satiny hallway. There was a noise like a distant waterfall – the thunder of a party well under way – punctuated by shouts, screams, laughter and applause.

'Sir?' said the Latin hunt-servant.

'Well,' said Cook, 'my name is –'

'Miss DeFoe is expecting you?'

'Yes yes. Oh yes.'

An inner door opened and the waterfall was on top of them.

The party was amazing. Two thick, hysterical ranks of people faced each other across a narrow incomprehensible strip. They were clapping, cheering, howling. In a smoky corner there were bookies with blackboards and bowlers, adding to the bedlam with their shouts. There were men in white breeches and fanciful shirts, women in jockey-caps, drinks, waiters, laden tables, and a band pounding uselessly far away in the murk.

Cook edged forward and craned his long neck over the crowd. It was a tiny race-course. There were starting tapes, a finishing post, and white wooden rails four inches high. The frenzied crowd, many with race-glasses, shouted their fancies. And nearing the finish, neck and neck, two bright yellow celluloid clockwork ducks trundled along with rolling eyes.

'Geisha Girl!'

'Crystabel!'

'Come on, Geisha!'

A loudspeaker boomed over them all: '*... passing the two-yard post it's Geisha Girl by a short beak only - Geisha Girl a wing ahead now - and coming into the last yard it's Geisha Girl clear - Geisha Girl drawing away now in a beautifully-timed final effort - can Crystabel catch the favourite? - no, at the post it's Geisha Girl -*'

A furious noise drowned the loudspeaker - cheers and bellows, strangely shrill, like a dog-racing crowd confined in a saucepan.

'Good old Geisha!'

'Very fast duck.'

'One beautiful duck.'

'Get a nice price about her?'

'Six to four on.'

'No! She started at twos!'

'Second half of my double,' shouted a woman in flesh-pink racing silks.

'*Here is the result of the fourth race,*' boomed the loud-speaker. '*First number two, Geisha Girl, second number one, Crystabel. Distance one and a half lengths -*'

'Hot ziggety,' said an old American. 'That's six grand I made.'

'Waiter? Waiter?'

'That's a great duck.'

'Could train on.'

'Could stay the thirty yards.'

'Sure. Could be a staying duck.'

'Room for improvement.'

'Certainly is. Could be a great staying duck.'

'*Weighed in,*' boomed the loudspeaker.

'Man, where's my beautiful money?'

'Excuse me, sir,' said a big man in a purplish dinner-jacket. 'Your name is - ?'

'Cook.'

The big man looked down a typewritten list.

'You won't find it there,' said Cook heartily. 'I did say I might not be able to come -'

'This way, sir, please.'

Cook was eased, as though by a velvet bulldozer, through the crowd and out of the door.

The Maltese in the pink coat looked at him reproachfully. 'You told me an untruth, sir.'

Cook, further impelled, was in the street. The door shut softly behind him.

'Damn damn,' he said. 'Oh damn damn damn.'

The noise of the party came through the door like foreign traffic heard from a small, high window. Cook raised a thumb to the bell-push, then thought for a moment and let it fall.

'Oh damn,' he said.

He brushed some cigar-ash (somebody else's) very thoroughly from his left lapel and went sadly down the pavement. Soon he was in the petrol-scented warmth of the Bayswater Road.

'Taxi!' he called to a cruising fleet.

None stopped, and he began to walk slowly towards Marble Arch.

Just short of the tube station there was a man with a tray slung round his neck.

'Mouse, guv?'

'Mouse? Mouse? Mouse?'

'Wind 'em up. They go for miles.'

* He was a thin little man, very old, with a woolly muffler.

'Very well made,' he said. 'Solid like.'

'Fast?'

'Lightning.'

'Let's have a look.'

Cook picked over the old man's tray of mice and selected a neat grey with long soft whiskers. Three red wheels jutted from its tummy; a key stuck out of its back.

'Beautiful mouse, sir.'

'Nice quarters,' said Cook. 'Try it?'

'Cert'nly.'

The mouse-seller wound up his mouse and put it on the

ground, facing it safely at the wall of a building. It skidded for a moment on the smooth stone, then whirred across the pavement. It hit the wall with a soft click and its powerful little motor buzzed in vain.

'See? Lovely toy. Kiddies go wild.'

'Yes,' said Cook. 'Fast mouse.'

He bought it and stumped back to Hyde Park Circle.

'Really, sir,' said the Maltese. 'Once is enough.'

'To heel,' said Cook savagely.

He strode into the big room. The noise was still loud but less overwhelming. It was a pause between races: time for drinks.

'My mouse,' shouted Cook, 'will beat any mouse in the room.'

His voice had the remnants, blurred but still impressive, of the drill-square rasp of his youth. Silence fell, not at once but piece by piece. Faces swivelled towards him – white, pink, purple, with bat-winged spectacles or fleshy noses, with surprised open mouths or half-smiles or frowns.

'Challenge all comers,' shouted Cook. 'Challenge all mice.'

The large man in the mauve dinner-jacket rolled smoothly towards Cook.

'I hadn't imagined there was any misunderstanding, George,' he said softly.

'George?' said Cook, baffled.

'Lemme see this world-beating mouse,' said a baritone voice below Cook's chin.

He looked down. It was an old woman, strangely dressed. From her tiny patent-leather riding-boots blossomed ample white silk breeches; her blouse was cut remotely like racing-silks (the colours were pale blue with a crimson 'd' back and front); on her perfect, high-piled, pearly white hair, rakishly aslant, a jockey-cap was screwed with a diamond pin.

'C'mon, buster,' she growled, 'this mouse.'

'I'll remove him, Miss DeFoc,' said the big man.

'Remove a horse's ass,' she said.

She stuck out a small jewelled hand. Cook leant far down to shake it. Her grip was brief but firm.

'Nice of you to show,' she said.

'My name's Goldsmith,' said Cook.

'That right?'

'Professor Goldsmith.'

'Professor what of?'

'Cook Professor of English Poetry at the University of Oxford.'

'Did I ask you to this party?'

'I train my own mice - '

'I don't recall asking any Professor.'

'Keep a small stable of mice near Oxford - '

'I don't recall *knowing* any Professor.'

'I am here purely as a mouse-owner.'

'O.K. Professor. Maybe you're what this party needs.

C'mon and meet people.'

'Thank you very much.'

'But Miss DeFoc,' said the big man.

'Fly a kite,' she said. 'Where's this mouse?'

'Here,' said Cook.

'Fast?'

'A flier.'

'Stay?'

'Twenty feet,' guessed Cook.

'Minimum distance. Well, I like a sprinter.'

'Could be more,' said Cook. 'Don't know how heavy your going is.'

'Want a trial?'

'Secret?'

'Where do you get that secret stuff? Ashamed? Afraid?'

'Don't want to spoil the market,' said Cook.

'You're a funny Professor.'

'Thank you.'

'Never have figured you for a professor. Of *poetry*? Well, you must know your own job, I guess. O.K., Professor, you got yourself a trial gallop over the training course.'

'Good of you.'

'What you *may* have down there is a reporter.'

'Surely not.'

'These newspaper guys are hard to keep out. Grab yourself a drink on the way. When you've tried your mouse on the deck there, come along to the stewards' office.'

At the far end of the room, close up under the tinkling and wailing band (four sad, yellowish men with octagonal glasses) there was a strip of carpet railed like the course. Cook glanced round. No one was watching: the party eddied and swivelled and shifted in the other half of the room, as though the floor had been tipped and they had all slithered down into a tight mass at the bottom of the slope.

Cook paced the carpet. He made it eight yards. His mouse covered it in twenty-one seconds: running (Cook thought) very fast. He gave it a stamina test. Fully wound, it did one full length and nearly a half before stopping. But the last few feet were slow and faltering. He decided thirty feet was its racing limit.

'Clever boy,' he said, picking up the mouse and stroking its whiskers, 'win us a packet.'

'Excuse me, sir,' said a young man in a flannel suit who suddenly appeared at Cook's elbow. 'Professor Goldsmith, isn't it?'

'Yes, *certainly*.'

'That's a good-looking mouse.'

'Not bad.'

'You must have great faith in him.'

'Hm,' said Cook, guarded.

'What is his name. It is a he?'

'Colt, yes. Charles de Gaulle.'

'Ah, French?'

'Dam's side only. Who are you?'

'I represent the *Sporting Leaf*, sir - '

'What? Reporter?'

'Yes indeed. Now I wonder if you'd mind answering - '

'Clock my mouse?' said Cook, enraged.

'Oh *no*,' said the young man. But he grinned and hurried away, disappearing through a door on the left.

'Damn,' said Cook. The door was locked when he reached it. On its pale veneer was roughly lipsticked: *The Sporting Leaf, Editorial Offices.*

'Blackguards,' said Cook, hanging.

'That's too bad,' said an elderly American. 'Those boys are surely wide awake. All be in the paper now.'

'What will? What paper?'

'Spoilt your coup?' said a hefty Englishwoman. 'That the mouse you say's so quick?'

'Charles de Gaulle,' said Cook. 'Quite a nippy performer, yes.'

He threaded through the party to a roped-off enclosure over which hung a sign saying 'Stewards'. Inside were Robin DeFoe and three old men in dinner-jackets, who sat on a sofa in a row.

'Professor,' called Robin. 'This is the professor,' she said to her colleagues.

'Goldsmith,' said Cook.

'Harry Blennerhasset, Duc de Monestier de Clermont, Lord Jarow.'

'Professor,' said the American.

'How do you do?' said the Frenchman.

'Hear your mouse is a sprinter,' said Jarow with disapproval.

'Thirty feet is his limit on this going.'

'More respect for a staying mouse myself.'

'Don't aspire to the Classics,' said Cook.

'Well, your true twenty-yard mouse is a rare bird. Now, this race. As you're challenging I suggest a sweep-stake.'

'Sensible,' said the Frenchman.

'Say £50 a mouse. Second to receive 10 per cent, third 5 per cent of the total stakes.'

'£50?' said Blennerhasset. 'Hell, make it a race.'

'£100?'

'Why not?'

'How many mice you got here, Robin?'

'Christ knows. Half a dozen, maybe.'

'Perhaps five runners,' said the Frenchman, 'Five hundred. Enough?'

'Added money?' said Jarrow dubiously.

'Sure,' said Blennerhasset. 'Make it up to a thousand, Robin.'

'Nuts,' said Robin. 'Who's paying for the liquor? Let's get with this race.' She looked round. 'Obby!' she shouted. 'Where the hell?'

Jarrow pressed a switch on a small khaki box and spoke into a portable microphone. '*Will the Stewards' Secretary,*' boomed his voice over the loudspeaker, '*please come to the Stewards' Office immediately.*'

A middle-aged man hurried up, pink and harassed and beautifully dressed in hunting tops and a black frock coat.

'Obby,' said Robin, 'take a race-card.'

'Sure, Robin. Gloria! Gloria! Where is that girl?'

Jarrow handed him the microphone.

'*Will the Secretary to the Stewards' Secretary report to the Stewards' Office immediately.*'

An elderly woman with violet hair came crisply up with her pencil ready.

'Shoot,' she said.

'Shoot,' said Obby.

'Fifth Race,' dictated Robin.

'Fifth Race,' echoed Obby.

'Oxford Challenge Stakes. Ten Yards -'

'Oxford -' said Obby.

'Ah shut up,' said Robin. 'We need a little efficiency-study around here. Hear me, Gloria? Ten yards. For mice only, fully wound at starting. A sweepstake of one hundred sovereigns -'

'Sovereigns,' said Blennerhasset. 'That I love.'

'Drop dead. Stake holder, Colonel Van Bosticke. Starter, Mrs Chantry. Judge - who'll we get to judge this?'

'Colleen there. Hey, Colleen, you gotta judge this one.'

'Me? Ah, Harry, I want to bet on this one.'

'She wants to bet.'

'I love that Charles de Gaulle. See where they say in the paper he did the eight yards in twenty dead?'

'What?' said Cook. 'What paper?'

'*Sporting Leaf*. Here.' Colleen, a sweet-faced old lady, handed him a Roneo'd sheet.

Glimpses of the Gallops [Cook read].

Professor Goldsmith's grey sprinter Charles de Gaulle has been pleasing at home. Our Reporter clocked a scintillating 20.6 in his fast work this evening over the measured eight yards. Sports silk in the fifth. Carries owner's confidence, we hear. Likely to be well backed, whispers Our Man In The Ring, but who'd sooner have a long-priced loser? Said the Professor to our Reporter, with British understatement, 'My French-bred is not half bad.'

'Runners,' said Robin. 'Number One. Charles de Gaulle. Grey Colt, by Quick Thinking out of Gatecrash. Owned and trained Goldsmith. Number Two -'

'Me, me,' said a woman. 'My lil Matilda.'

'You running that crocodile, Lou-Ann?'

'Why yes! Ten yards is just her distance, and this morning she did twenty-six.'

'That was on the parquet, honey,' said a man who held her mouse.

'Good mouse,' said Jarrow, 'acts on any going.'

'That's *exactly* what I say to Cavendish.'

'Matilda Whiskers,' dictated Robin, 'Brown filly, by Mutation Mink out of Alimony -'

'Hey,' said the man. 'Such a thing as old-world courtesy.'

'Owned Mrs Cavendish Tinker, trained C. Tinker. Check?'

'Check,' said Gloria.

'Number three -'

'Cathode-ray here,' called a burly man with a white crew-cut.

'You, Ferdy,' growled Robin. 'I oughta have you pitched out.'

'Ah, Robin.'

'Take a ninety-second spot on the Network, you said, peak time three times a week for two months, and we'll see what happens to sales. We see, Ferdy, by Christ we see.'

'Ah Robin, we been over all that - '

'Shop,' said Jarrow severely.

'That's Robin's thirteenth ad agent in eight years,' said Blennerhasset, gravely, to Cook. 'I guess the honeymoon period's over.'

'Are the other twelve here?'

'Are they *here*? Jesus, they're *dead*.'

'All of them?'

'Most. Or in sanitoriums. Ulcers, breakdowns, hit the bottle, two suicides - she merely devours them. Just merely chews them up, and when they hit the cuspidor they're re-elly through.'

'I don't follow you.'

'Don't follow them, Professor, that's all I say.'

'O.K.' said Robin dangerously. 'Cathode-ray. Dirty-yellow colt - '

'Not a colour,' said Jarrow.

'Now it is. By Fast Talk out of Malpractice - '

'Not fair,' said Ferdy. 'Listen, we're re-examining the TAM ratings, listen, we're reappraising the motivational appeals - '

'Number Four,' said Robin ruthlessly. 'Well? You people all afiaid of the big bad mouse?'

Three more mice were entered: a big pink (made in Hong Kong) called Sun Yat Sen; a good-looking black called Auntie's Nightmare; and Seabiscuit XVI, a skew-bald with a rather common head.

'Owners,' commanded Robin, 'will kindly deposit stakes with the official stake-holder.'

Cook borrowed a Fabergé ball-point from the owner of Seabiscuit XVI and made out his cheque for £100.

'D. Cook,' read Colonel Van Bosticke, a keen-eyed man with his initials embroidered on his tie.

'Silly of me,' said Cook, and added a hyphen and 'Goldsmith.'

'Cook-Goldsmith. Double-barrelled you call that, hey?'

'Never use it.'

'Pity. Sounds great.'

‘Cumbersome.’

‘Maybe you’re right at that.’ Colonel Van Bosticke laughed loudly and inexplicably, made a tick on his list, and put Cook’s cheque in his pocket. ‘Pass, Professor.’

‘*Runners for the Fifth Race*,’ thundered Lord Jarrow’s voice over the loudspeaker, ‘*to the parade-ring please.*’

‘Have I got time for a drink?’ said Cook.

‘Sure,’ said Robin. ‘Make it a quickie.’

Cook made it a quickie, then took another and carried it and Charles de Gaulle to the paddock. This was a circular area of carpet, four feet across, round which the crowd pressed. Cook pushed through, spilling many drinks but not his own, and put his mouse down with the others to be looked at.

‘There’s a pretty mouse.’

‘Crazy whiskers. See those crazy whiskers?’

‘That’s my mouse.’

‘Charles de Gaulle. My, what a mouse!’

‘The paper says he’s fast.’

‘They been wrong.’

‘They been right.’

‘Would you mind *very* much not spilling your drink on my elbow?’

‘Would you mind *very* much getting the hell off my foot?’

‘Wow, get that. Did you get that?’

‘Me. I like that pink boy.’

‘Not genuine. Never stay the distance.’

‘Ah, what a grouch. Isn’t he a grouch?’

‘Have another drink.’

‘Yes, *have* another drink.’

‘Ooh *yessy.*’

‘No thanks, thanks very much – ’

‘Ah, what a spoilsport. Isn’t he a spoilsport?’

‘Mind your *backs*, please. Mind your backs, *please.*’

‘Hey, will you look?’

‘Robin is crazy. That girl is crazy.’

A television camera mounted on small fat tyres was being pushed up to the paddock. Operating it was a young man

Cook put on his hat. 'Good-bye,' he said politely. He turned and walked stiffly down the lane.

A stable lad laughed. The string moved forward again. Cook was muddy and chilled. He walked fast to get warm, and slept heavily on the train to London.

COOK changed his clothes with relief. He considered having a bath, but he had never had a bath before lunch and would have felt uncomfortable doing so. He remembered, with pleasure, that he was staying with Roly this week for Goodwood. So he packed a few clothes into his large and grotesquely heavy suitcase, and gave the camera and tripod back to his landlady. Then, since he was catching an afternoon train to Sussex, he went to Blazon's for lunch.

After lunch he took the new *Country Life* into the telephone-box in the hall and surreptitiously tore out two pages of advertisements for houses.

'Really,' said a member crossly, seeing him at it through the glass door of the telephone-box, 'somebody ought to say something to the secretary.'

'Somebody does, every six or eight years,' said another member. 'You, as a rule, isn't it?'

'I like reading those pages.'

'You've got a house. You don't need them.'

'Desmond can't afford a house. He doesn't need them.'

'It's his hobby, Charles. You collect Spode, Desmond collects advertisements for houses. Don't be small-minded.'

'Oh very well, very well. But why can't he get his pictures out of old *Country Lives*?'

'Lives.'

'Lives. Really? Lives. Lives. Country Lives. Are you sure? It sounds wrong.'

'Grammar.'

'Yes? It sounds wrong.'

Cook emerged, tucking the stolen pages into his pocket and humming innocently. Anyone who saw him at this moment, for the first time, would have known that he was guilty of some recent, serious misdemeanour.

'Besides,' said the first member, 'I hate those tatty bits where he's torn them out. Those damned torn bits.'

'You're being small-minded, Charles.'

'Thank God you've come,' said Roly at Midhurst Station. 'This party we've got is absolutely terrible.'

It was, Cook found. So very soon after dinner the two of them left the drawing-room (an argument was being conducted, in bitter, reasonable voices, about Baroque) and went to play ping-pong in an outhouse. They played for sixpence a game. Roly, who practised constantly, won the first two. But Cook outsmarted him in the third with a series of very slow, heavily cut, lobby shots which made Roly angry and put him off.

'Come on,' he said, 'let's have a drink. You don't play properly.'

'Change of pace,' said Cook. 'Outgeneralled.'

'Not very sporting, Desmond.'

'Bad loser? What? Bad loser?'

'Yes, always have been. Hate losing. Come on.'

'Do we,' said Cook nervously, 'have to go back and listen to all that talk?'

'No no. I've got some whisky in my study.'

'Have you got a study?' asked Cook, impressed.

'Of course I've got a study.'

'What for?'

'It's where I play my gramophone.'

They played the 'Blue Danube' and then some jigging records new to Cook. These brought Roly back to cheerfulness.

'Isn't it superb?' he said. 'I'll put that one on again, shall I?'

'What is it?'

'The Theme Music of the Roving Cowhand. ITV. We'll watch it tomorrow. Magnificent. All over the prairies, and the Indians attack, or bad hombres, or one thing and another. By the way, have you found out any more about your tip for the Charles de Gaulle?'

‘Hard to say. There’s something funny about that filly that won at Ascot.’

‘Yellow Belly.’

‘Yellow Silk. And there’s a girl who knows something about that.’

‘Have you asked her?’

‘We’re not on those terms. But there’s something there, something. . . . And there’s an Italian fellow who blinked a bit when I talked about Hock and Moselle.’

‘Ah, Desmond, getting warm!’

‘Yes, I feel that. I feel that, yes.’

‘Why did the Italian fellow blink?’

‘That I can’t say.’

‘Ask him?’

‘He wasn’t in the mood. Just had his heart broken.’

‘Really? Poor chap. Why?’

‘My fault, I’m afraid.’

‘My dear Desmond, what have you been doing?’

‘Scouting about. Fun, in a way.’

‘And you’re getting somewhere?’

‘Sometimes I think so. Sometimes not.’

‘I wish you luck.’

‘Thank you, Roly,’ said Cook gravely. ‘Thank you very much.’

The next day, at Goodwood, under a blazing but less enervating sun, Cook lost two hundred pounds on the Stewards’ Cup (a wild bet caused by lunch) and then had a thousand on the next winner at even money. This put him, altogether, thirty-one hundred up.

After dinner, drunk and sleepy, he and Roly watched the television in the dining-room. Dinner had been dainty, so they ate cocktail biscuits and salted almonds, thus giving themselves thirsts and so becoming drunker. In the first quarter-hour of the programme the Roving Cowhand, very slowly, took a job as ramrod of a big spread called the Sleepy Q. Then there was a batch of commercials, which astonished Cook.

'Bore,' apologized Roly.

'What? Rather gay. What's that woman doing?'

'The chap's shirt is whiter.'

'My God, *so it is*. Remarkable. I call that remarkable.'

'All tricks.'

'No. Surely not. Really?' Cook was shocked. 'Government should intervene.'

'Hush,' said Roly.

The Roving Cowhand ran into trouble. The second quarter-hour ended badly for him.

'Look for *your* new Cliptoys in every sunshine-packed box of Brekkiflake,' said the television aggressively.

*'Cliptoys,
Cliptoys,
In every Brekkiflake!'*

'Cliptoys?' said Cook.

'You make them. The bits are in the packet and you clip them together and make toys.'

'Rather fun.'

'Tremendous fun.'

*'Cliptoys,
Cliptoys,
For every child to make!'*

Cook was asleep by the end of the third quarter of the programme. Roly watched the rest alone, following the action with frowning attention.

The following afternoon Cook lost two thousand pounds in three bets.

'As to the Spanish character *per se*,' said Mr Carraway after dinner, 'allow me, if you will, to tell you a little story about an experience we had some years ago -'

'Reverting, Lillian,' said Mrs Carraway, cutting him off mercilessly, 'to our conversation of two nights ago -'

'The Spanish,' said Miss Linden, 'have an austerity of

approach which, to me – but you may think me overly impressionable –’

‘Between Barcelona and –’

‘While C. A. Lejeune is obsessed, I grant, with –’

‘Always think of myself as a *wide-eyed* traveller –’

‘Come on, Desmond,’ said Roly, ‘Stockwhip.’

‘What?’

‘Splendid programme. Guns.’

Cook, numbed by his losses, sat sadly in front of the television screen as he had sat sadly through dinner.

*‘Cliptoyz,
Cliptoyz,
In every Brekkiflake –’*

On the next day, Thursday, Cook had mixed luck. On the first four races he lost two hundred, won four, won five, and lost two. This put him five hundred up on the day and brought him back to sixteen hundred up altogether.

He saw Polly Curtis and tried to hide. But do what he might his head stuck up above other nearby heads and she looked at him with anger and dislike.

After dinner he and Roly played ping-pong for a fiver a game. In the first Roly found an answer to Cook’s gentle spins: he gently spun them back and reduced Cook to whacking the table, fruitlessly, inches from the ball. But in the next two Cook developed and perfected a counter-weapon: very high shots which passed out of the light into the deep shadows of the roof before plummeting back. Many of these struck the edge of the table glancingly and flew, irretrievably, under the deck-chairs stacked against the wall. Soon there was only one cracked ball left. Roly refused to play with this, so they listened to the gramophone in his study and went singing to bed.

On Friday, the last day of Goodwood, no favourite won in the six races. Cook, mercifully, had only one bet: the second favourite in the first, which won at six to one.

The rich woods and the great downs glowed in the sun, and faces everywhere were pink or brick or brown.

Cook saw Polly Curtis again: close to, this time, in the bar with her brother. Her face and arms were a wonderful gold. He was the reddest of bricks. She looked sadder (Cook thought) than she usually looked. He hoped this was not his doing: but, if it was, it was interesting.

He pulled his hat (his usual hat) uselessly down to hide his face and drank his brandy and soda.

Polly saw him at once. She looked at him, worrying, and made abstracted answers to Jack's chatter.

That horrible snoop-y old man, with his ginny veiny face and his revolting hat. How much did he know? What was he after? Obviously he hadn't seen Yellow Silk properly, or he wouldn't have hidden like a great grey worm in the ditch. But obviously he suspected, or he wouldn't have come poking about with his imitation camera. He knew about the scar. And he'd talked about a three-inch nail, so he knew the way it had happened. What else did he know? What would he do? What would happen to Jack?

And Mario! It was Mario's doing! Polly had cried for a long time on that awful Sunday afternoon, but that was all got rid of now and she felt nothing for Mario but loathing and contempt.

After dinner Cook and Roly watched Panhandle, a fast-moving story about cattle-rustling, impenetrably obscure to Cook. Roly explained it as it went along.

'You see, *they* don't realize *this* chap's the crook.'

'But this chap's the lawyer.'

'Always the crook, always.'

'Good God.'

End of Part One.

'Cliptays,

Cliptays,

In every Brekkiflake!'

Cook sat gently celebrating. Goodwood finished, and he

had ended up a little, but only a little, below his score when it started. This had never happened before. Hock and Moselle. . . .

The bangs and crashes of the story and Roly's excited commentary flowed past him. He drank a lot of whisky and thought, cloudily, about a neat white house with orchards and paddocks and a mile of gin-clear trout-stream.

Presently Panhandle came to an affecting end and Roly, staggering a little, walked over to the television set and switched it off.

'I want to make a Cliptoy,' said Cook.

'What a good idea.'

'You got the stuff?'

'Brekki flakes? Let's go and look.'

In the larder they found one half-full and two unopened packets of Brekki flake. Each was nearly two feet high, and the printing on the cardboard trumpeted the presence, inside, of Cliptoys. Cook took the half-full packet and peered in.

'Force,' he said. 'It's just Force.'

'No, new sort.'

'Very nice,' said Cook, nibbling a flake.

'Very.'

'Can't see any Cliptoys.'

'Empty it out.'

'All right.'

Cook upended the packet and golden flakes of cereal showered over the kitchen linoleum. Last of all a cellophane envelope fluttered out.

'Ha!'

They bent over the kitchen table, their feet crunching in Brekki flakes. Roly tried to take the cellophane envelope but after a brief struggle Cook kept it and tore it open.

'Remind you I'm your guest,' he said sternly.

He tried to clip the Cliptoy together, but it defeated him.

'*That* bit goes in *there*,' said Roly.

'But it's got this blob.'

'That's the clip.'

'Clip? Clip? Clip?'

'Let me, Desmond. *Please let me.*'

At last Cook let him, and Roly put a small plastic helicopter together quite quickly.

'You've practised,' said Cook.

'Mechanical ability.'

'Common thing to have,' said Cook crossly. 'I want to do one.'

'Open another packet.'

So Cook tore open one of the new packets.

'Go on,' said Roly.

Cook emptied it over the table. 'We can sweep it up and put it back,' he explained.

'*Very good idea.*'

After a long, anxious struggle Cook assembled a pink aeroplane. He held it up proudly, and then swooped it to and fro with zooming noises.

'My turn,' said Roly, and opened and emptied another packet.

His Cliptoy was a ship, and difficult. They studied the parts together, Brekkiflakes clinging to their hands and arms and legs.

Roly's sister came in suddenly. They faced her, frightened. Cook cleared his throat and shifted his feet, crunching and pulverizing the flakes on the floor. Then Roly began to take handfuls of flakes and put them back into a packet. After a moment Cook started to help him.

AT Epsom on Saturday Cook had a horrible hot time and lost four hundred. He had left Roly's house, in disgrace, in the early morning, and lunched off fruit cake at Waterloo Station. He had a headache which grew worse through the afternoon. When he got home he lay on his bed with his handkerchief over his eyes.

On Sunday he felt better. He went for a walk, wrote a poem about ducks, and played his records of Caruso, Scotti, and Galli-Curci on his old hand-cranked Victrola.

In the early evening, as usual, he spent an hour on his homework from St Hildreth's Correspondence College. It was Lesson 16, Poultry. When he had finished it he lay back, eyes closed, and saw white geese waddling over a smooth meadow beside a stream, turkeys and guinea-fowl pecking at scientific feeders, and new-laid eggs – tiny and brown and freckled – coming to his breakfast-table every morning.

On Monday the weather was cool and showery, but the bank holiday crowds were packed like pilchards both sides of the course at Epsom. Cook backed a horse in the third race at four hundred pounds to win nine, and saw it get home by a head in the slanting rain.

At Brighton on Tuesday it was wetter still. Not enough rain to soften the iron-hard going, but enough to make it skiddy and treacherous on top – enough to upset the form. Cook had one small losing bet and went home soaked and sober.

On Wednesday he sipped his second cup of coffee and looked at the streaming windows. He almost decided not to go to Brighton. But he thought, padding about in his slippers and rustling *The Times*: only six weeks to the Charles de Gaulle. He thought: must get a stake together for the

last big bet. So he got out his greenish umbrella, caught the train, and lost five hundred pounds.

On the third and last day he had bets on the first three races. He lost two hundred, then won five hundred and then a thousand. Thirteen hundred up on the day, thirty-three hundred up altogether.

'Lumme,' said Laurie Love's clerk on the rails, huddling under the huge umbrella.

'Don't worry, George,' said Laurie. 'Tomorrow's Newmarket, right? And the next day. Then there's Sandown, Newbury, York, right? Des is doing very nice today but we'll have it back, don't worry.'

'Lumme,' said George, 'I hope so.'

When Cook reached his flat he went to sleep, without meaning to, awkwardly across a chair, and woke up stiff and sneezing at a quarter past seven. He put mustard in his bath and decided to have some hot whisky and water when he went to bed. For he was going to Newmarket the next day, staying with Sammy Masters for the two-day meeting. This was an arrangement made weeks before at Windsor. Cook was sadly aware that Sammy's wife had bitterly opposed it at the time and ever since, but Sammy had insisted. Nice of Sammy.

The weather at Newmarket was better but still bad. Cook won eighteen hundred pounds. He spent Sunday reading the *News of the World*, not speaking at meals, and trying to be invisible when Sammy's wife was in the room. She had, herself, lost one pound three on the meeting; she was extremely put out by Cook's winnings. There was nothing, Cook saw, he could do about this, except pretend to be clean and sober.

He went back to London on Monday (missing racing for the day) and put in three bewildered hours on Lesson 17 from St Hildreth's: Chemistry. Doing his exercise at the end he cheated, for the very first time. His feeling of guilt lasted all through dinner.

On Tuesday morning he pushed his breakfast-tray as far down the bed as he could with his hands, then eased it

farther down by jiggling his knees and then his feet. The coffee cup lurched, wobbled, and recovered. The top fell off the sugar bowl with a small, appalling crash. The neat, scooped crown of his boiled egg toppled delicately off the egg-plate, hit the raised edge of the tray, and fell on to the old blue blanket. Cook tried to reach it, straining forward as he sat, in the manner of a man doing slimming exercises. He touched it with the tip of a finger: but it danced away out of his reach.

'Curse you,' he said aloud. He leant back and drew up his thin old knees. Thereafter, when he moved, the egg-shell swung and slithered like a lonely coracle on the billows of a huge blue sea.

He thought about his killing on the Charles de Gaulle, parading his clues for inspection as, once, he had paraded soldiers in bearskins and scarlet. Tallest on the right, shortest on the left. Number one (right marker): Yellow Silk had won at Ascot when it was impossible that she should do so. The little Irishman had known she would, by something he observed about her which astonished and frightened him. Then he had been laid out and carted off. Memo: those holy sandwich-men might give a bit more help. Hock and Moselle. Meant something, perhaps, to that young Italian. Memo: try it on him again and watch him closely. Scar, three-inch nail. Meant something to the Curtis girl. Probably related to Yellow Silk. Memo: query possibility of getting anything out of Curtis girl? Query possibility of having another look at Yellow Silk. Pig-man. Grudge. Corkscrew. Meant damn all to anybody.

The thought of going to Gunn's Lodge again filled him with fear and distaste. He must approach the problem from another direction. Cross-bearing. Recce.

He pondered, frowning.

Tired lines sagged from his eyes and the corners of his mouth. One sparse bunch of sandy hair stuck up from the back of his head; over his ears whiter tufts straggled like wind-blown thistledown. He wriggled his head to get comfortable against the topmost of his four pillows, stared un-

seeing round his bedroom (comfortable, long-familiar, not much loved), and knotted his hands round his knees.

On the bedside table, to his left, lay *Raceform* and the *Collected Poems of Tennyson*. The bedside lamp was converted from a heavy brass candlestick. Above it, in a pearwood frame, hung a print of a Corporal of Pomeranian Hussars in the uniform of 1830: the one survivor of a set that had hung in his bedroom when he was a child. Beyond the door was his dressing-table. On it lay an almost hairless silver-backed hairbrush (one of a pair he had been given for his twenty-first birthday); a shiny new clothes-brush; a stud-box he had been given when he was somebody's best man in 1923; a pile of form books; a pair of spurs; and an enormous faggot of pencils, the harvest of years. Above hung Bend Or, magnificent in a gold surround but stained in an upper corner. Beyond stood his wardrobe, with room for fifty suits. He had six suits: morning dress, tails and dinner-jacket, all made before the first war, and three others made soon after it. Beyond again, under the window, stood a shoe-rack: room for twenty pairs and exactly full. All his shoes were thick, black, and very shiny. He had bought one pair a year, from Lobb, from 1919 until 1939, when it had seemed patriotic to stop. Near the window was his wash-basin, with tooth-brushes, nail-brushes, pumice stone and razor – the razor he had bought for fourpence, in Folkestone in 1931. Some years ago someone had given him a shiny new one for Christmas, elegantly wrapped in celluloid and plastic. He had never undone it; it lay on a shelf of his wardrobe, dun with dust.

Meanwhile, he thought, he had got his winnings up to £5,100. Very nice but not enough. If there was something fishy in the Charles de Gaulle (and there was! and there was!) and if he found out about it (and he would! and he would!) then somebody else would know about it too – whoever was working it. Perhaps the owner, perhaps not. That meant a lot of money on it. That meant a short price. That meant Cook's bet must be at least £10,000. Say, three to one. £30,000.

He yawned and stretched, spread-eagled on his pillows. The sun had long ago left his window and the bedroom was very dark. He switched on the bedside light and took the volume of Tennyson. Marking his place (near the end of the 'Idylls of the King') there was a piece he had torn out of *The Times*: the runners for the Charles de Gaulle. Julep, Canasta, Tancredo, Larksong, Toffee-Apple, Phoenix Park, Perelandra, Lucky Jim, Christo, Late Frost. An interesting thing would be the betting: if one was heavily backed already it might be a pointer to something. Were they betting yet? The race was five weeks off: they might be.

Cook chewed his big pink knuckles, thinking, and then padded next door into his sitting-room. He stared at his list of bookmakers and presently dialled a number.

'Cavendish and Carroll, good morning.'

'I want to speak to Mr Carroll.'

'Who is that speaking, please?'

'Cook.'

'Just one moment, please - '

The telephone clerk buzzed his director.

'Major Cook for you, Mr Carroll.'

'Christ,' said 'Gaudy' Carroll. 'O.K., put him on.'

He was the sharpest dresser in the National Sporting League and his office was perhaps the ugliest. He smoked fat Egyptian cigarettes, had nude ladies on his braces, and had once, years before, taken Cook home and put him to bed after an evening meeting at Ally Pally.

He picked up the telephone. 'Carroll?'

'Morning, Gaudy. Cook speaking.'

'Ah, Major, good morning sir. Haven't heard your voice for a long time.'

'No? No, possibly not. Gaudy, you know this Charles de Gaulle thing?'

'Longchamp, Sunday, September 20th. Difficult race, Major.'

'Made a book?'

'Hardly, sir. Which horse had you in mind?'

'Ah,' said Cook, sounding wise. 'Money going on?'

'No doubt of that, Major, no doubt at all. Where I couldn't tell you off-hand - I personally haven't laid a bet on the race. It's early days, sir, early days -'

'Well, look here, Gaudy . . . hm. Interested to know where the money's going -'

'Good question, Major, wise precaution, sir. I'm interested myself. I'll ask some of our friends in the profession. There won't be an official call-over, not for a week or two yet -'

'No, no. Like an indication, though -'

'Just so, Major, exactly so. Will you be at Sandown, sir?'

'Yes,' said Cook sadly.

'Then I'll see you there and tell you what I can.'

'Good of you, Gaudy, thank you.'

Gaudy pursed his big wet lips as he put the telephone down. Had the old love got a horse? If he had it might be a good one - there was nothing wrong with his judgement when he was sober. Gaudy hoped he had a good one. It was sad seeing a tired old buster go on and on, hoping hoping hoping, getting nicely up and then skidding down. . . . That night, in the taxi back from Ally Pally, Gaudy had heard Cook's dreams - a long bass mumble about houses and rose trees. He was quite right, poor old sweetie - he ought to be squatting nice and quiet in the country.

Gaudy sighed, and began making telephone calls to friends of his.

Half-way through the second day of Sandown, Cook was three hundred down. Leave it there, he thought. Don't make it worse.

The crowd was streaming down the hill from the paddock to the Tote and the bookies and the grandstand; on the narrow tan path beside the asphalt the horses for the fourth race were delicately stepping down towards the course.

Drink? thought Cook. He looked at the horses appraisingly - from habit, and not because he was interested. Yes,

drink. He turned decisively towards the bar above the Tote Investors' building.

'Major,' called a fruity voice.

'Ah, Gaudy, afternoon. Have a drink.'

Gaudy's news was rather sparse. There was money for nearly every runner in the Charles de Gaulle.

'So it don't help us much, eh, Major?'

'Not much,' said Cook, vexed.

'And, see,' said Gaudy, waving his Farouk-sized cigarette, 'far as my mates can tell, the money for the French one is French money, get it? And the money for the Swedish one's Swedish, get it? All very natural.'

'Owners,' said Cook.

'That's it, Major, you've hit it, sir. Owners all over backing their own. Trainers maybe. Owners' aunts and mums and grannies. All very natural, nothing to help us. But -'

'Yes? Yes? Yes?'

'We got a call-over on the Ebor tonight at the Victoria Club.'

'Ebor? York meeting's when?'

'Next *week*, Major.'

'Good God, so it is.'

'I must say,' said Gaudy, 'for a racing man you got a wild idea of the calendar.'

'Live from day to day.'

'And hand to mouth, sir. Har har,' laughed Gaudy fatly, 'har har.'

'Ha,' said Cook, unamused. 'In a sense,' he added, seeing Gaudy was right.

'Well, Major, be at Newbury tomorrow, sir?'

'Yes,' said Cook, thinking with despair of his hour and a half each way in the train.

'I *knew* it. My guess, now, is there'll be some bigger money for the French race this evening. When we done talking about the Ebor, see? Might help us.'

'Might.'

'All be in the papers, if so.'

'Yes, but,' said Cook, 'you can find out where the money's from?'

'Could do,' said Gaudy, 'could do.'

Cook smiled. 'Thank you, Gaudy. Very much indeed.'

He sucked at his brandy and soda.

Dear old crumb, thought Gaudy. Help him all I can.

The hour and a half to Newbury seemed seven and a half, the seat stone, the air dirty and empty of oxygen. Cook, getting out stiffly, thought with horror of the journey back.

But on the course he cheered up, and won four hundred on the second.

After the third he met Gaudy.

'The two they want, Major -'

'Two?'

'Two. Larksong and Toffee-Apple.'

'Hm. Larksong's Italian.'

'Italian-bred. Trained there. American owns it.'

'Her.'

'Filly, Major, quite correct, sir.'

'And Toffee-Apple is, hm, Irish.'

'Irish colt, correct again, Major. But another American been and bought him.'

'Get all the best ones.'

'*Don't* they, sir, *don't* they? The long purse. Well, good luck to them - nice-behaved people.'

'So what did you finish with? Joint favourites?'

'Near enough, Major. Larksong nine to two. Toffee-Apple fives.'

'Ridiculous prices.'

'Quite, sir. For a race that's five weeks off they're robbery. Still, that's where the money's going and you can't get a soul to lay you better.'

'Any others?'

'Dribbles, sir. The feeling at the Club last night -'

'Yes? Yes? Yes?'

'The opinion is, the race is between those two Yanks. Best of their age in Europe, people think. This Larksong – run once. Rome. Walked it. Record time. They're talking her up for the Oaks. And this Toffee-Apple – run once. Leopardstown. Walked it. Near record time. Bloke last night wanted to back him for the Guineas, but he couldn't find a layer.'

'Good God.'

'Good horses, Major, real class. You don't have to look much farther.'

'Probably not.'

Probably not, thought Cook on the train.

Toffee-Apple. Trained by T. O'Mara on The Curragh. Owned by Mr Dickinson Lough of Chicago – '*whose horses,*' said an evening paper, '*have taken some valuable prizes in the Middle West.*'

Larksong. Trained by P. Perotti near Turin. Owned by Mrs Wilmington of New York City – '*one of the most colourful recruits to racing,*' said the same article, '*for many years, on the other side of the Atlantic.*'

These people were backing their own horses, no doubt. And their stables, and their friends, and a lot of other people who knew how good the animals were. '*... comes as no surprise,*' said the article, '*to learn that only short prices are available about these two. Everyone who saw Toffee-Apple trounce some respectable opposition over the minimum distance at Leopardstown last month knew they were in the presence of a champion. And all who witnessed, as I did, the way Larksong made hacks of her opponents six weeks ago at Rome. . . .*'

Yes. Very straightforward. Very disappointing.

Toffee-Apple was to have one more race in Ireland before the Charles de Gaulle. Larksong had had a minor interruption of training and would go, they thought, straight to Longchamp. The other runners? '*... hard to see,*' said the article, '*how any of these honest but unspectacular performers can live with the two American-owned cracks. . . .*'

Cook yawned and longed for a drink. Presently he dug in

his pockets and spread on his knees a sheaf of cuttings from *Country Life*.

'Desmond!' said Roly. 'By God you got me in bad.'

'Whose fault was that?'

'Yours.'

'Yours.'

'Yours.'

They both laughed.

'This is my nephew Ralph,' said Roly, 'and this is his wife Pamela.'

'Nephew?'

'Jock's son.'

'Jock?'

'My brother.'

'Ah, your brother Jock. I'm with you, Roly, with you. Come and have a drink. *All of you.*'

It was Saturday, the second day of the Newbury meeting. Cook, seven hundred up on the day and eleven hundred up on the meeting, felt expansive.

'Champagne?'

'You don't like champagne.'

'But *you do.*'

'Have brandy.'

'Really? All right. Yes, better for me.'

'How's your big tip, Desmond?'

Cook told him Gaudy's news. 'This American fellow,' he finished, 'and this American woman. They own the best ones and they're backing them. All perfectly honest. Sickening.'

'Larksong,' said Roly's nephew. 'That's Robin DeFoe's.'

'Belongs to a Mrs Wilmington.'

'Better known as Robin DeFoe.'

'Who the hell's Robin DeFoe?'

'*What?*' cried Roly's nephew's wife, forbidding in a royal blue mohair beret. 'You've never heard of Robin DeFoe?'

'Writer?' hazarded Cook.

'Only of advertisements.'

'Don't follow you. Sorry.'

'Empress of corsetry,' said Roly's nephew. 'A great woman. Ah, there are the Loudons, dear. We must go and talk to the Loudons.'

Cook and Roly were left together.

'Thank God,' said Roly, 'respite. I'm staying with them and I'm going mad. Do you know, they haven't even got a television? I couldn't even see the Roving Cowhand.'

'Rotten,' said Cook.

'This news of yours,' said Roly, 'these two horses that all the money's going on -'

'Yes?'

'You ought to find out a bit more about them. One of the owners may be crooked, for instance. Probably that American suspender-belt woman.'

'Robinson Crusoe.'

'Robin DeFoe. Possibly they're backing the animal like mad now, and then making sure it wins later.'

'How?'

'Dirty work of some kind. Or, Desmond, perhaps they're going to make sure the horse *doesn't* win.'

'Then why are they backing it?'

'Ah, I can't tell you that. Up to you to find out.'

'Yes,' said Cook, 'perhaps you're right.'

'Get alongside these owners.'

'I *will*. How do you mean, alongside?'

'Get to know them. Sound them out.'

'I *will*.'

£5,900, thought Cook, stretching his legs across the compartment. That's where we are and a very nice start.

'Ow.' The plump girl opposite gave a tiny, ladylike scream.

'I beg your pardon?' Cook looked at her with contrition. 'Did I kick you?'

'Just a teeny bit.'

'Very clumsy,' he said, 'forgive me.'

'Granted.'

'Snout?' said her Ronnie, offering the Rothman's Kingsize.

'No, ta,' she said. Ronnie had a lot to learn.

She smiled at the old man, forgiving him. He smiled back and she felt all warm.

They rattled through a grim suburb and Cook read his evening paper. *Summer Strike? Railmen Meet. Pop Singer In Court. Damages For M.P. Emir Flies In. Model Flies Out. Crisis In Theatreland. Tragedy In Acton. Party of Century?*

Cook glanced out of the window, saddened by all these disasters, and then bent wearily back to the paragraph on the social page.

PARTY OF CENTURY?

The celebrated Miss Robin DeFoe, corsetière supreme, is giving one of her fabulous parties tonight. She has taken a house for the occasion. Location is close secret, but I can reveal that it is 16 Hyde Park Circle. Miss DeFoe's parties are legendary, but tonight's promises to be the most spectacular yet. Horse-racing is the theme – Miss DeFoe's latest and greatest enthusiasm.

PRINTS GIVE INSPIRATION.

Oswald Caunter has designed the décor. Said Mr Caunter to our reporter this morning: 'I have taken as my inspiration some wonderful old prints of English race-courses in the nineteenth century. It has been a challenge.' There will, we hear, be a race-course installed, complete with starter, judge, and bookmakers. A lot of money, we gather, may be expected to change hands. What exactly is to be raced is not, however, yet revealed. Says Miss DeFoe: 'Surprise!' We confess to a lively curiosity.

What would you race, thought Cook, in a house in Hyde Park Circle? Beetles? Frogs? People on their hands and knees? He too felt a lively curiosity. Besides, this absurdly-named woman owned Larksong, one of the favourites in the Charles de Gaulle. As Roly said, he ought to check up on her.

Fleas, could it be? Spiders? Newts?

COOK's dinner-jacket had, of course, started black. In the thirties it had become green. Now it was an uneasy, inconsistent red. But it was very clean and very well pressed: for he was, in certain limited ways, a fastidious man. Wearing it, and with an ample satin bow-tie slightly askew, he climbed out of a taxi at 16 Hyde Park Circle. He rang the bell, and a Maltese in hunting pink let him into a satiny hallway. There was a noise like a distant waterfall – the thunder of a party well under way – punctuated by shouts, screams, laughter and applause.

'Sir?' said the Latin hunt-servant.

'Well,' said Cook, 'my name is –'

'Miss DeFoe is expecting you?'

'Yes yes. Oh yes.'

An inner door opened and the waterfall was on top of them.

The party was amazing. Two thick, hysterical ranks of people faced each other across a narrow incomprehensible strip. They were clapping, cheering, howling. In a smoky corner there were bookies with blackboards and bowlers, adding to the bedlam with their shouts. There were men in white breeches and fanciful shirts, women in jockey-caps, drinks, waiters, laden tables, and a band pounding uselessly far away in the murk.

Cook edged forward and craned his long neck over the crowd. It was a tiny race-course. There were starting tapes, a finishing post, and white wooden rails four inches high. The frenzied crowd, many with race-glasses, shouted their fancies. And nearing the finish, neck and neck, two bright yellow celluloid clockwork ducks trundled along with rolling eyes.

'Geisha Girl!'

‘Crystabel!’

‘Come on, Geisha!’

A loudspeaker boomed over them all: ‘... *passing the two-yard post it’s Geisha Girl by a short beak only – Geisha Girl a wing ahead now – and coming into the last yard it’s Geisha Girl clear – Geisha Girl drawing away now in a beautifully-timed final effort – can Crystabel catch the favourite? – no, at the post it’s Geisha Girl –*’

A furious noise drowned the loudspeaker – cheers and bellows, strangely shrill, like a dog-racing crowd confined in a saucepan.

‘Good old Geisha!’

‘Very fast duck.’

‘One beautiful duck.’

‘Get a nice price about her?’

‘Six to four on.’

‘No! She started at twos!’

‘Second half of my double,’ shouted a woman in flesh-pink racing silks.

‘*Here is the result of the fourth race,*’ boomed the loud-speaker. ‘*First number two, Geisha Girl, second number one, Crystabel. Distance one and a half lengths –*’

‘Hot ziggety,’ said an old American. ‘That’s six grand I made.’

‘Waiter? Waiter?’

‘That’s a great duck.’

‘Could train on.’

‘Could stay the thirty yards.’

‘Sure. Could be a staying duck.’

‘Room for improvement.’

‘Certainly is. Could be a great staying duck.’

‘*Weighed in,*’ boomed the loudspeaker.

‘Man, where’s my beautiful money?’

‘Excuse me, sir,’ said a big man in a purplish dinner-jacket. ‘Your name is – ?’

‘Cook.’

The big man looked down a typewritten list.

‘You won’t find it there,’ said Cook heartily. ‘I did say I might not be able to come –’

'This way, sir, please.'

Cook was eased, as though by a velvet bulldozer, through the crowd and out of the door.

The Maltese in the pink coat looked at him reproachfully. 'You told me an untruth, sir.'

Cook, further impelled, was in the street. The door shut softly behind him.

'Damn damn,' he said. 'Oh damn damn damn.'

The noise of the party came through the door like foreign traffic heard from a small, high window. Cook raised a thumb to the bell-push, then thought for a moment and let it fall.

'Oh damn,' he said.

He brushed some cigar-ash (somebody else's) very thoroughly from his left lapel and went sadly down the pavement. Soon he was in the petrol-scented warmth of the Bayswater Road.

'Taxi!' he called to a cruising fleet.

None stopped, and he began to walk slowly towards Marble Arch.

Just short of the tube station there was a man with a tray slung round his neck.

'Mouse, guv?'

'Mouse? Mouse? Mouse?'

'Wind 'em up. They go for miles.'

He was a thin little man, very old, with a woolly muffler.

'Very well made,' he said. 'Solid like.'

'Fast?'

'Lightning.'

'Let's have a look.'

Cook picked over the old man's tray of mice and selected a neat grey with long soft whiskers. Three red wheels jutted from its tummy; a key stuck out of its back.

'Beautiful mouse, sir.'

'Nice quarters,' said Cook. 'Try it?'

'Cert'nly.'

The mouse-seller wound up his mouse and put it on the

ground, facing it safely at the wall of a building. It skidded for a moment on the smooth stone, then whirred across the pavement. It hit the wall with a soft click and its powerful little motor buzzed in vain.

'See? Lovely toy. Kiddies go wild.'

'Yes,' said Cook. 'Fast mouse.'

He bought it and stumped back to Hyde Park Circle.

'Really, sir,' said the Maltese. 'Once is enough.'

'To heel,' said Cook savagely.

He strode into the big room. The noise was still loud but less overwhelming. It was a pause between races: time for drinks.

'My mouse,' shouted Cook, 'will beat any mouse in the room.'

His voice had the remnants, blurred but still impressive, of the drill-square rasp of his youth. Silence fell, not at once but piece by piece. Faces swivelled towards him - white, pink, purple, with bat-winged spectacles or fleshy noses, with surprised open mouths or half-smiles or frowns.

'Challenge all comers,' shouted Cook. 'Challenge all mice.'

The large man in the mauve dinner-jacket rolled smoothly towards Cook.

'I hadn't imagined there was any misunderstanding, George,' he said softly.

'George?' said Cook, baffled.

'Lemme see this world-beating mouse,' said a baritone voice below Cook's chin.

He looked down. It was an old woman, strangely dressed. From her tiny patent-leather riding-boots blossomed ample white silk breeches; her blouse was cut remotely like racing-silks (the colours were pale blue with a crimson 'd' back and front); on her perfect, high-piled pearly white hair, rakishly aslant, a jockey-cap was screwed with a diamond pin.

'C'mon, buster,' she growled, 'this mouse.'

'I'll remove him, Miss DeFoe,' said the big man.

'Remove a horse's ass,' she said.

She stuck out a small jewelled hand. Cook leant far down to shake it. Her grip was brief but firm.

'Nice of you to show,' she said.

'My name's Goldsmith,' said Cook.

'That right?'

'Professor Goldsmith.'

'Professor what of?'

'Cook Professor of English Poetry at the University of Oxford.'

'Did I ask you to this party?'

'I train my own mice - '

'I don't recall asking any Professor.'

'Keep a small stable of mice near Oxford - '

'I don't recall *knowing* any Professor.'

'I am here purely as a mouse-owner.'

'O.K. Professor. Maybe you're what this party needs.

C'mon and meet people.'

'Thank you very much.'

'But Miss DeFoe,' said the big man.

'Fly a kite,' she said. 'Where's this mouse?'

'Here,' said Cook.

'Fast?'

'A flier.'

'Stay?'

'Twenty feet,' guessed Cook.

'Minimum distance. Well, I like a sprinter.'

'Could be more,' said Cook. 'Don't know how heavy your going is.'

'Want a trial?'

'Secret?'

'Where do you get that secret stuff? Ashamed? Afraid?'

'Don't want to spoil the market,' said Cook.

'You're a funny Professor.'

'Thank you.'

'Never have figured you for a professor. Of *poetry*? Well, you must know your own job, I guess. O.K., Professor, you got yourself a trial gallop over the training course.'

'Good of you.'

'What you *may* have down there is a reporter.'

'Surely not.'

'These newspaper guys are hard to keep out. Grab yourself a drink on the way. When you've tried your mouse on the deck there, come along to the stewards' office.'

At the far end of the room, close up under the tinkling and wailing band (four sad, yellowish men with octagonal glasses) there was a strip of carpet railed like the course. Cook glanced round. No one was watching: the party eddied and swivelled and shifted in the other half of the room, as though the floor had been tipped and they had all slithered down into a tight mass at the bottom of the slope.

Cook paced the carpet. He made it eight yards. His mouse covered it in twenty-one seconds: running (Cook thought) very fast. He gave it a stamina test. Fully wound, it did one full length and nearly a half before stopping. But the last few feet were slow and faltering. He decided thirty feet was its racing limit.

'Clever boy,' he said, picking up the mouse and stroking its whiskers, 'win us a packet.'

'Excuse me, sir,' said a young man in a flannel suit who suddenly appeared at Cook's elbow. 'Professor Goldsmith, isn't it?'

'Yes, *certainly*.'

'That's a good-looking mouse.'

'Not bad.'

'You must have great faith in him.'

'Hm,' said Cook, guarded.

'What is his name. It is a he?'

'Colt, yes. Charles de Gaulle.'

'Ah, French?'

'Dam's side only. Who are you?'

'I represent the *Sporting Leaf*, sir - '

'What? Reporter?'

'Yes indeed. Now I wonder if you'd mind answering - '

'Clock my mouse?' said Cook, enraged.

'Oh *no*,' said the young man. But he grinned and hurried away, disappearing through a door on the left.

'Damn,' said Cook. The door was locked when he reached it. On its pale veneer was roughly lipsticked: *The Sporting Leaf, Editorial Offices.*

'Blackguards,' said Cook, banging.

'That's too bad,' said an elderly American. 'Those boys are surely wide awake. All be in the paper now.'

'What will? What paper?'

'Spoilt your coup?' said a hefty Englishwoman. 'That the mouse you say's so quick?'

'Charles de Gaulle,' said Cook. 'Quite a nippy performer, yes.'

He threaded through the party to a roped-off enclosure over which hung a sign saying 'Stewards'. Inside were Robin DeFoe and three old men in dinner-jackets, who sat on a sofa in a row.

'Professor,' called Robin. 'This is the professor,' she said to her colleagues.

'Goldsmith,' said Cook.

'Harry Blennerhasset, Duc de Monestier de Clermont, Lord Jarrow.'

'Professor,' said the American.

'How do you do?' said the Frenchman.

'Hear your mouse is a sprinter,' said Jarrow with disapproval.

'Thirty feet is his limit on this going.'

'More respect for a staying mouse myself.'

'Don't aspire to the Classics,' said Cook.

'Well, your true twenty-yard mouse is a rare bird. Now, this race. As you're challenging I suggest a sweep-stake.'

'Sensible,' said the Frenchman.

'Say £50 a mouse. Second to receive 10 per cent, third 5 per cent of the total stakes.'

'£50?' said Blennerhasset. 'Hell, make it a race.'

'£100?'

'Why not?'

'How many mice you got here, Robin?'

'Christ knows. Half a dozen, maybe.'

'Perhaps five runners,' said the Frenchman. 'Five hundred. Enough?'

'Added money?' said Jarrow dubiously.

'Sure,' said Blennerhasset. 'Make it up to a thousand, Robin.'

'Nuts,' said Robin. 'Who's paying for the liquor? Let's get with this race.' She looked round. 'Obby!' she shouted. 'Where the hell?'

Jarrow pressed a switch on a small kliaki box and spoke into a portable microphone. '*Will the Stewards' Secretary,*' boomed his voice over the loudspeaker, '*please come to the Stewards' Office immediately.*'

A middle-aged man hurried up, pink and harassed and beautifully dressed in hunting tops and a black frock coat.

'Obby,' said Robin, 'take a race-card.'

'Sure, Robin. Gloria! Gloria! Where is that girl?'

Jarrow handed him the microphone.

'*Will the Secretary to the Stewards' Secretary report to the Stewards' Office immediately.*'

An elderly woman with violet hair came crisply up with her pencil ready.

'Shoot,' she said.

'Shoot,' said Obby.

'Fifth Race,' dictated Robin.

'Fifth Race,' echoed Obby.

'Oxford Challenge Stakes. Ten Yards -'

'Oxford -' said Obby.

'Ah shut up,' said Robin. 'We need a little efficiency-study around here. Hear me, Gloria? Ten yards. For mice only, fully wound at starting. A sweepstake of one hundred sovereigns -'

'Sovereigns,' said Blennerhasset. 'That I love.'

'Drop dead. Stake holder, Colonel Van Bosticke. Starter, Mrs Chantry. Judge - who'll we get to judge this?'

'Colleen there. Hey, Colleen, you gotta judge this one.'

'Me? Ah, Harry, I want to bet on this one.'

'She wants to bet.'

'I love that Charles de Gaulle. See where they say in the paper he did the eight yards in twenty dead?'

'What?' said Cook. 'What paper?'

'*Sporting Leaf*. Here.' Colleen, a sweet-faced old lady, handed him a Roneo'd sheet.

Glimpses of the Gallops [Cook read].

Professor Goldsmith's grey sprinter Charles de Gaulle has been pleasing at home. Our Reporter clocked a scintillating 20.6 in his fast work this evening over the measured eight yards. Sports silk in the fifth. Carries owner's confidence, we hear. Likely to be well backed, whispers Our Man In The Ring, but who'd sooner have a long-priced loser? Said the Professor to our Reporter, with British understatement, 'My French-bred is not half bad.'

'Runners,' said Robin. 'Number One. Charles de Gaulle. Grey Colt, by Quick Thinking out of Gatecrash. Owned and trained Goldsmith. Number Two - '

'Me, me,' said a woman. 'My lil Matilda.'

'You running that crocodile, Lou-Ann?'

'Why yes! Ten yards is just her distance, and this morning she did twenty-six.'

'That was on the parquet, honey,' said a man who held her mouse.

'Good mouse,' said Jarrow, 'acts on any going.'

'That's *exactly* what I say to Cavendish.'

'Matilda Whiskers,' dictated Robin, 'Brown filly, by Mutation Mink out of Alimony - '

'Hey,' said the man. 'Such a thing as old-world courtesy.'

'Owned Mrs Cavendish Tinker, trained C. Tinker. Check?'

'Check,' said Gloria.

'Number three - '

'Cathode-ray here,' called a burly man with a white crew-cut.

'You, Ferdy,' growled Robin. 'I oughta have you pitched out.'

'Ah, Robin.'

'Take a ninety-second spot on the Network, you said, peak time three times a week for two months, and we'll see what happens to sales. We see, Ferdy, by Christ we see.'

'Ah Robin, we been over all that - '

'Shop,' said Jarrow severely.

'That's Robin's thirteenth ad agent in eight years,' said Blennerhasset, gravely, to Cook. 'I guess the honeymoon period's over.'

'Are the other twelve here?'

'Are they *here*? Jesus, they're *dead*.'

'All of them?'

'Most. Or in sanitoriums. Ulcers, breakdowns, hit the bottle, two suicides - she merely devours them. Just merely chews them up, and when they hit the cuspidor they're re-elly through.'

'I don't follow you.'

'Don't follow them, Professor, that's all I say.'

'O.K.' said Robin dangerously. 'Cathode-ray. Dirty-yellow colt - '

'Not a colour,' said Jarrow.

'Now it is. By Fast Talk out of Malpractice - '

'Not fair,' said Ferdy. 'Listen, we're re-examining the TAM ratings, listen, we're reappraising the motivational appeals - '

'Number Four,' said Robin ruthlessly. 'Well? You people all afraid of the big bad mouse?'

Three more mice were entered: a big pink (made in Hong Kong) called Sun Yat Sen; a good-looking black called Auntie's Nightmare; and Scabiscuit XVI, a skew-bald with a rather common head.

'Owners,' commanded Robin, 'will kindly deposit stakes with the official stake-holder '

Cook borrowed a Fabergé ball-point from the owner of Scabiscuit XVI and made out his cheque for £100.

'D. Cook,' read Colonel Van Bosticke, a keen-eyed man with his initials embroidered on his tie.

'Silly of me,' said Cook, and added a hyphen and 'Goldsmith.'

'Cook-Goldsmith. Double-barrelled you call that, hey?'

'Never use it.'

'Pity. Sounds great.'

‘Gumbersome.’

‘Maybe you’re right at that.’ Colonel Van Bosticke laughed loudly and inexplicably, made a tick on his list, and put Cook’s cheque in his pocket. ‘Pass, Professor.’

‘*Runners for the Fifth Race*,’ thundered Lord Jarrow’s voice over the loudspeaker, ‘*to the parade-ring please.*’

‘Have I got time for a drink?’ said Cook.

‘Sure,’ said Robin. ‘Make it a quickie.’

Cook made it a quickie, then took another and carried it and Charles de Gaulle to the paddock. This was a circular area of carpet, four feet across, round which the crowd pressed. Cook pushed through, spilling many drinks but not his own, and put his mouse down with the others to be looked at.

‘There’s a pretty mouse.’

‘Crazy whiskers. See those crazy whiskers?’

‘That’s my mouse.’

‘Charles de Gaulle. My, what a mouse!’

‘The paper says he’s fast.’

‘They been wrong.’

‘They been right.’

‘Would you mind *very* much not spilling your drink on my elbow?’

‘Would you mind *very* much getting the hell off my foot?’

‘Wow, get that. Did you get that?’

‘Me. I like that pink boy.’

‘Not genuine. Never stay the distance.’

‘Ah, what a grouch. Isn’t he a grouch?’

‘Have another drink.’

‘Yes, *have* another drink.’

‘Ooh *yessy.*’

‘No thanks, thanks very much –’

‘Ah, what a spoilsport. Isn’t he a spoilsport?’

‘Mind your *backs*, please. Mind your backs, *please.*’

‘Hey, will you look?’

‘Robin is crazy. That girl is crazy.’

A television camera mounted on small fat tyres was being pushed up to the paddock. Operating it was a young man

with long yellow hair. Behind him came two men in leather coats carrying powerful lamps.

'Mind the *cables*, please. Don't tread on the cables, *please*.'

'*tv!* Robin got *tv!*'

'Why, this is murder! Am I on the air?'

'How do I look? How's my lipstick? Hey, should I wet my lips?'

'Just hide, honey. If I was you I'd just go hide.'

'Oh sure, Virginia darling, if you were me I guess you'd be right to.'

'Only closed-circuit, lady. Not going out to millions.'

'Not?' The woman, in a long evening dress, looked infinitely miserable. 'Well, that's certainly a relief.'

'Sets there and there and there,' said the cameraman.

Flickering grey boxes were indeed suddenly noticeable in different parts of the room.

'Ferdie must have fixed this for Robin.'

'That girl is finally crazy.'

'Wonder why it's just starting now?'

'Technical difficulties,' said the cameraman. 'What a carry-on we had. Not allowed to set the receivers up till we was getting a signal – well, we *said*, double the time to get ready.'

'Aha. Ferdie loused it up.'

'Lose the account in a month.'

'Month? Brother, he lost it already.'

A balding man in green tweeds was murmuring to one of the lamp-holders. Now he pressed forward and began talking, rapidly and confidentially, into a long thin microphone: 'All the runners are now in the paddock for this fifth race here this evening, the Oxford Challenge Stakes for mice over the straight ten yards. Worth £510 to the winner, very nice, very nice indeed. Now here is number four, the pink Sun Yat Sen – built like a true sprinter, stocky, close-coupled, reminds one of the Golden Cloud male line, though a different colour to be sure, ha ha, a different colour – and here is the dark mouse of the race, the one they're all talking about, the grey Charles de Gaulle – useful-looking sort, good

head, fine deep chest, plenty of heart room – I wonder how they're betting now – last I heard they were making this one a clear favourite at fifteen to eight or thereabouts –'

Betting, thought Cook. By God, yes.

Leaving his mouse to the camera he edged through the crowd to the bookies.

'Seven to four the field,' called the nearest.

On his board Cook read that Charles de Gaulle was the seven-to-four favourite, Scabiscuit XVI second favourite at nine to four, Sun Yat Sen and Cathode-ray together at threes, Auntie's Nightmare seven to one, and Matilda Whiskers one hundred to six.

'Hm,' said Cook, 'I'll have –'

'Cash only, sir. Very sorry.'

'Cash? Cash? What do you mean, cash?'

'Saw your mode of entry, sir. No offence.'

'It's the *Major*,' said a voice. 'See, George? Here's the Major!'

'Thank God,' said Cook. 'Still got credit with you I hope?'

'I should say you have, sir,' said Laurie Love, who wore a bow tie with very long red points and a dinner-jacket made of some shiny artificial fabric. 'Backing your own I hope.'

'Certainly. Seven to four –'

'Very much fancied, Major.'

'Lay me, hm, the odds to four hundred.'

'Seven hundred pounds to four, George, Charles de Gaulle to win, Major Cook.'

Laurie immediately rubbed the chalked '7/4' off his board beside Charles de Gaulle's name. He frowned abstractedly for a moment, then wrote '4/5'.

The bookies each side of him (there were four in all) peered round, then quickly made the change too. Scabiscuit eased to eleven to four, Sun Yat Sen and Cathode-ray to seven to two, and Auntie's Nightmare went out to tens. One of the bookies (a long sad man in a tartan coat) made Matilda Whiskers twenty to one and began shouting her hopefully at this price.

Cook thrust back towards the paddock, passing, on his way, one of the closed-circuit television sets. The picture showed a close-up of a blotchy mouse on a background of Axminster and blurred, enormous, fore-shortened feet.

'... Seabiscuit XVI,' came the voice of the commentator, whistling and booming over the thick black wires. 'Not a class mouse to look at, but his form shows he's got a pretty useful engine - second in the handicap sprint here this evening, the first race on this evening's card - a lot of people thought he was unlucky to lose - got away slowly from the gate, inexperience of the jockey, perhaps, unfamiliar conditions - covered the ten yards, which is the distance of this next event, in twenty-five seconds - that puts him about on a par with Charles de Gaulle -'

God, thought Cook.

'*Sporting Leaf, Sporting Leaf*,' chanted a man in a cloth cap, carrying a bundle of the Ronco'd sheets. 'Eleven-fifty edition -'

'This ink wet again?'

'Wet from the presses, lady, yes - want to take care, you do, with those gloves -'

'You buy it and read it me, Father.'

'Certainly, baby. Sixpence, right?'

Cook bought one and unfolded it.

Seabiscuit to come in on the tide [he read].

The 11.45 race will be a lively betting medium, says Our Man On The Carpet. Ante-post backers have shown a marked preference for Charles de Gaulle, Professor Goldsmith's renowned flier. But price will be unduly cramped about a mouse who has yet to see a race-course. We think better bet may be Mr Dickinson Lough's Seabiscuit XVI. The skewbald will have profited from his previous race, where he lost no marks in a praiseworthy attempt to give four feet to the useful Cathode-ray. He is full of courage and sure to give his supporters a good run. May oblige at attractive odds, and is napped to reverse the placings with Mr Ferdie Feldman's chestnut. Danger is Charles de Gaulle, and forecast punters will be on to this first-second combination. . . .

Ha, thought Cook. Mr Dickinson Lough. Owner of

Toffee-Apple. Meet him. At the paddock Lord Jarrow was fussily in charge.

'Professor, Professor,' said Jarrow. 'Get mounted, please.'

The other owners were winding up their mice. Cook picked up his and began turning the key, holding the small red wheels with the fingers of his left hand.

'All runners down to the start, please,' called Jarrow.

'Hey, what order?'

'Correct draw order.'

'We haven't had any draw.'

'Oh Lord, Oh Lord - '

They drew hurriedly. Cook found himself drawn three, with Sun Yat Sen on his left and Cathode-ray the other side. Seabiscuit was drawn five, near the right-hand rails.

The owners crouched down, a tight-packed, fan-shaped scrum.

'Oh,' said the fluffy owner of Matilda Whiskers, pink with vexation, 'I laddered.'

'Suspender button gone,' grunted Dickinson Lough.

Cook, on thin stiff knees, checked that his mouse was wound to the utmost and put the little wheels firmly on the carpet.

The television camera rolled a few feet down the course to their right. 'The runners are getting themselves sorted out at the start,' said the commentator. 'Girths are all tightened, yes, and here is Mrs Chantry to call the roll - '

'Number One, Auntie's Nightmare - ' The Starter, very like a man, wore a gross number of diamonds.

'Here,' said the owner, a red-haired girl in brilliant green breeches.

'They'll be coming under orders any minute now,' said the commentator.

'Six to four on the field,' chanted the bookies in the distance.

'Charles de Gaulle! See those whiskers?'

'Sun Yat, Sun Yat, Sun Yat-Sen!'

'Now, lil Matilda, run for Mommy - '

The Starter's Assistant held up a white flag.

'*Under Starter's Orders*,' boomed the loudspeaker.

The white tape in front of the mice whipped up and away.
'*They're off!*'

'Sun Yat Sen is the first to show,' said the commentator, 'and he's setting a sizzling pace – my goodness, what a gallop – then it's Matilda Whiskers close up – Seabiscuit going well third, Charles de Gaulle, Auntie's Nightmare, and Cathode-ray a little slowly away and back marker at present – At the end of the first yard that's the order –'

'Matilda,' cried the owner.

'Seabiscuit, Seabiscuit –'

The crowd was roaring and craning. Cook stood up stiffly, narrowly avoiding a fall over the red-haired girl who crouched, rapt, shouting her mouse's name.

'Matilda is hanging badly to the right,' said the commentator, 'is she going to hit the rails? Yes, no, she's bounced off, she's all right – no, she's run out – Matilda Whiskers is out of it – that leaves Sun Yat Sen the clear leader after two yards, Seabiscuit a length behind in second place, Charles de Gaulle another length away, third –'

'Charley,' shouted the crowd.

'Beautiful boy,' muttered Cook, 'run like hell –'

The camera rolled along the right-hand side of the track, pursued by the men with the lamps. 'Stand clear of the cables, *please* –'

'Now at the half-way mark the order is unchanged – Sun Yat Sen still setting a cracking pace – is he going to make all the running? – Seabiscuit, Charles de Gaulle –'

'Seabiscuit,' shouted Lough, 'Seabiscuit –'

'Cathode-ray has been making up a bit of ground – he's only just behind Auntie's Nightmare –'

'*Ride him,*' said Ferdie, scarlet under his stiff white bristles.

'Lovely man, go like stink –'

'Oh Matilda, you did it *again* –'

'Now at the two-yard marker they're taking closer order – Seabiscuit has come up level with Sun Yat Sen and Charles de Gaulle is a bare length behind –'

'Charley-arley,' shouted the crowd.

'Sun Yat Sen is falling back now – won't make the trip by the look of things – Seabiscuit and Charles de Gaulle have both gone past him, Cathode, Auntie –'

'Silly man, beautiful man,' muttered Cook.

'Coming into the last yard it's Seabiscuit half a length up on Charles de Gaulle – hanging slightly left as he comes under pressure – will he hamper the favourite?'

'Keep *straight*,' bellowed Lough.

'Eighteen inches to run and Seabiscuit is slowing down, I think – has he shot his bolt? – Charles de Gaulle is up to his quarters – Seabiscuit still hangs left – yes, I think they might have bumped –'

'Foul riding! See that?'

'Charley –'

'The favourite's making a brilliant late run but he's got right behind Seabiscuit now and I don't think he'll pass him – it's a desperately near thing between these two – Seabiscuit is hanging on – at the post it's Seabiscuit by a whisker –'

'First Number Six, Seabiscuit – Second Number One, Charles de Gaulle – Third Number Five, Auntie's Nightmare – Distances, a whisker and three lengths.'

'Damn,' said Cook bleakly.

'Wurr hell,' said Dickinson Lough, 'you have a fine mouse there, Professor. Too bad he found one too good for him.'

'Object,' growled a voice near Cook's hip-bone.

'Ah,' said Cook, 'Miss DeFoe -'

'Object, you crumb! Bumping, boring, off a true line -'

'Hey,' said Lough.

'Hey to you, little man.'

'Yes,' said Cook. 'Objection!'

'*Objection*,' boomed the loudspeaker.

The crowd buzzed and crackled.

'Take ten to one Charley,' came Laurie Love's distant shout. 'Ten to one against Seabiscuit.'

'Prejudging,' said Lough, flushing 'Proper inquiry. Forms of law.'

'Grounds?' asked the Duc de Monestier de Clermont, a moment later, by the roped-off sofa.

'Bumping, boring, not keeping to his true line. My runner was hampered -'

'So, Mr Lough?'

'I contend the result was in no way affected. I contend that this objection is frivolous, mischievous, irrelevant, and contrary to the highest traditions of the turf.'

'Of the carpet,' said Robin.

'Crossed his line and whacked him on the head with his quarters,' said Jarrow shortly. 'Flagrant foul.'

'I would agree,' said the Frenchman, 'I would uphold the objection.'

'Me too,' said Blennerhasset. 'Nothing personal, Dicky.'

'You would, Harry?' said Lough. 'You would? What about that contract to build our new plant? Didn't you say you wanted that, Harry?'

'Would you bring up a thing like that at a time like this?'

'I certainly would.'

'All right, Dicky,' said Blennerhasset heavily, 'all right, fella. I consider that the winner did not hamper the second in such manner as to influence the result of the race.'

'Two to one,' said Jarrow. 'Objection sustained.'

'I'm second, right?' said Lough.

'This is England. Jockey Club Rules. Your mouse is disqualified.'

'Objection sustained. First, Charles de Gaulle, second Auntie's Nightmare, third Cathode-ray.'

The party roared its approval.

The bookies began paying out.

'Now you come along,' said Robin to Cook, 'and let's have a little drink.'

Presently they were leaning on a window-sill drinking whisky and soda: Robin's dark brown, Cook's pale yellow.

'Well, Professor, I'm glad you showed. That was a great race. I just loved seeing you win.'

'Thank you very much.'

'Don't get me wrong. I don't give a damn about you one way or another. I just loved seeing that crooked little creep from Michigan get his.'

'Ah, Mr Lough. I felt rather sorry for him.'

'Save it.' She swigged at her powerful drink and lit a Marlboro. 'Just save it.'

Her tiny face was still beautiful: wholly artifact, made apparently of ceramic, only very slightly grotesque. Her prominent blue eyes shone with the habit of authority. In her strutting walk there was something of the dancer, something of the drill sergeant; in her wide, brisk gestures there was all the certainty of prophetess or god-queen.

'I hear you have a very nice filly,' said Cook.

'I have a raft of very nice fillies'

'Larksong.'

'That is one great horse.'

'Tell me about her.'

Robin told him, with pride and detailed knowledge, all

the things he already knew: Larksong's breeding, form, and reputation.

'Think she'll win at Longchamp?' he asked casually.

'Certainly she'll win.'

'Toffee-Apple?'

'Hound-meat.'

'Won very easily at Leopardstown.'

'Beat a load of crap. Your mouse would have won at Leopardstown.'

'Advise me to back your horse?'

'Listen – put your shirt, undershirt, cuff-links and sleepy-suit on Larksong. She can *not* lose. Everybody says so.'

'Quite right,' said the red-haired girl, who had come up quietly. 'I'm so glad you objected,' she said to Cook.

'Didn't seem unsporting?'

'Quite the *reverse*. And it made me *second*.'

'Professor Goldsmith,' said Robin, 'meet Miss Whooziz.'

'Mrs O'Mahoney,' said the girl.

'What? Are you the one that's married to that dead-beat horse dealer?'

'He's not dead-beat, he's –'

'He may not be dead,' said Robin, 'but he's certainly beat. Well, kids, have fun.'

She strode away like a clockwork bird, jewels tinkling and silks rustling.

'My God, what a woman,' said the girl.

'Nice, rather.'

'That's the trouble. When I'm with her I like her, but when I think about her I want to stab her with a shooting-stick.'

'Ah?'

'My husband nearly died of her.'

'Horse-dealer?'

'Bloodstock agent. He's the Dublin-Shoandoah Agency. He bought for Robin for six weeks – spent like mad all over Europe –'

'Buy Larksong?'

'Yes. Very odd business it was, too. And then, can you

believe it, we got the push. Pretty unfair, you must admit. But that six weeks she believed everything Paddy said, asked his advice, went to a trainer he recommended -'

'Nasty position,' said Cook. 'Big responsibility.'

'Nasty? It was bliss while it lasted. But it didn't last long. And after it stopped there were tears of blood.'

'Well, Professor,' said a ripe voice, 'that was a smart move, that objection.'

'Thank you,' said Cook.

Ferdy Feldman, the bulky advertising agent, thrust out a manly hand. Cook shook it politely; it was moist and soft, like warm lanolin.

'Yes, sir,' said Feldman, 'you put my mouse up there in the number three slot and I'm very, very grateful.'

'Another of Robin's handmaidens, I think,' said the girl.

'Foreman-Feinman-Feldman Associates,' said Feldman. 'Maybe not the biggest outfit on Madison Avenue, but in my submission -'

'Hey, Ferdy,' said a pale man with a giant salmon-fly stitched to his tie. 'Hey, Ferdy, I hear you're gonna lose the DeFoe account. I hear you're gonna take a dive in the billings.'

'F.F.F.A. has a very nice spread of accounts,' said Feldman stiffly. 'We can certainly stand to lose one client at this time or any time. The Strawjoys account alone -'

'Are you in the breakfast-food war?' asked the girl.

'We certainly are. You can quote me as saying, on behalf of Strawjoys -'

'I prefer Brekkiflakes,' said Cook.

'They found a wonderful gimmick, that I grant you. A fine piece of creative marketing.'

'Cliptoys. Rather amusing.'

'We are not ashamed to salute a major achievement in the child-motivated housewife-product category. Our own merchandising people are studying the Cliptoys operation pretty closely.'

'Some of them are rather difficult to put together.'

'That's extremely interesting, Professor.'

'The ship, for instance. A stinker.'

'I'll make a note of that. Construction of ship give-away inhibits easy assemblage. I'm very grateful, Professor.'

'Well, kids,' said Robin, reappearing with a refilled dark-brown glass. 'How's the party?'

'Wonderful, Robin,' said the girl.

'Just wonderful, Robin,' said Feldman.

'Nuts. Bored, Professor? Want to have a ball? Want to have a race? Want to have a laugh?'

'I have *you*,' asked Cook confidentially, 'backed Lark-song?'

'Yes,' said Robin, 'yes, I have. You may say I have. And my advice to you is, put your shirt, pants, under-pants and jockey-belt on Larksong. Money for jam, friend, money for sweet orange marmalade.'

She meant it: and Cook believed her.

'What about the scar?' he said suddenly. 'What about the three-inch nail?'

'Where? Here? Are you crazy?'

Her face showed nothing but impatience.

'Well, what,' said Cook, 'what about -'

'Hey, Robin,' said Dickinson Lough, walking up heartily with a glass in his hand, 'this is certainly one wonderful party.'

'What the hell did you expect, two wonderful parties?'

Lough laughed a little falsely. 'Always on the ball, this girl.'

He turned to greet someone and Robin said to Cook, quite loudly: 'That is a very terrible little creep, that Lough.'

'Really?' said Cook, embarrassed. 'He seems friendly.'

'By Jesus he's friendly. Friendliest creep in the Nato countries.'

Lough, who had heard all this, coloured and then laughed, unhappily at somebody's joke.

'Robin, Robin,' called Harry Bleenerhasset, 'will you come over, please? We have a little problem on the sixth race -'

'Ah Christ,' said Robin, 'those stewards need their diapers changed again. Be good, Professor.'

She strode away.

Cook sipped his whisky and watched the eddying, unlikely party. There was nothing, obviously, fishy about Larksong. She was favourite on the basis of well-known public form and because her owner, a millionairess who believed in her, had backed her heavily.

No dark secrets. No grounds for coshes and kidnaps. Not where his killing lay.

Lough came up to Cook again, spilling a little from his glass. 'You don't want to pay any attention to Robin,' he said.

'No,' said Cook. 'Now you own Toffee-Apple, is that right?'

'What a horse. I paid six thousand at Goff's - pounds, not dollars. I would have gone to ten.'

'Fancy his chance in the Charles de Gaulle?'

'I certainly do. He'll eat them.'

'I hear Larksong is fast.'

'Robin's? Ah, she talks so big you'd think everything she had was Nashua.'

Cook tried him with Hock and Moselle, corkscrew, scars and three-inch nails; there seemed to be no reaction at all. Waiters refilled their glasses, and presently Lough became garrulous. He owned, Cook understood, nearly every factory in the Middle West.

'Prepacked food,' he said. 'Let me tell you something. In a few years Mrs American will never shell a pea, string a bean, skin a fish or bone a steak. Let me tell you something. She won't even have to crack an egg. We do it for her. Technology does it for her. Everything young Mrs Modern American buys will be quick-frozen, double-wrapped, pre-flavoured, vitaminized, calorie-reduced - '

'Good God,' said Cook.

'This is a new epoch, Professor. This is a new way of life.'

'I'm *sure* it is,' said Cook. 'Are you backing Toffee-Apple?'

Lough rolled his eyes and rubbed his thumb against his

forefinger. 'I am, Professor, and if you want to make yourself some folding, you back him too.'

'Reload, Professor,' said Robin, reappearing. 'Your tank's dry.'

'Ah, aha, thank you.'

She turned to Lough. 'Run along, peanut. The quality want to talk to each other.'

Lough looked as though he wanted to say something, but he reddened and went away.

'You're rather horrid to him,' said Cook. 'Inoffensive little man.'

'Crooked little bedbug.'

'Crooked?' said Cook, keenly interested, 'is he? To your certain knowledge?'

'Yes, Professor.'

'Can you give me any details?'

'Jesus, you don't want to talk about Dicky Lough. Tell me about this party. I don't know about parties. Maybe they're fun.'

'This is an excellent party.'

'I know *that*.'

'Excuse me, Major, pardon me, sir - ' Laurie Love had come up and stood nervously at Cook's elbow. 'Shall we send you a cheque, sir, or the usual arrangement?'

'Usual,' said Cook, trying to push him away.

'Usual, George, didn't I say so? George would have it, it was different, being mice. George, credit Major Cook's account - '

'What did you call him?' asked Robin.

'Old nickname,' said Cook, 'ha ha, they call me Major - '

'Cook.'

'Cook, yes. Silly, really - '

'I get it,' said Robin. 'Finally I get it. Professor - that never did figure. Professors don't enter any hundred-pound sweepstakes and they don't bet any four hundreds on party games, and they don't look one little bit the way you look. I get it. You're a tout, hey? Promoter? Shover? Shuffler? Shark? Con-man? Jerome!' she shouted. 'Jerome!'

The big man in the mauve coat was suddenly there and had taken Laurie's arm.

'Not him, Jerome. This customer with the fast mouse.'

'I didn't mention, Miss DeFoe - '

'Sure, Jerome. You were right and I was wrong and I haven't said that in forty-five years.'

Cook was propelled, as though on roller-skates, across the room and out.

'Please, Mac,' said Jerome, 'take a hint this time, won't you?'

'Mac?' said Cook, 'Mac?'

The door shut and the noise faded.

Well, thought Cook, well. Seven hundred, and the stake money five. Twelve hundred. Total up to seven thousand or thereabouts. Nice but not enough. And Larksong? Owner giving it, everybody giving it. May well be the best bet, even as a short-priced favourite. But that's not what the Irish fellow meant. That's not why the other chaps conked him. Toffee-Apple? Same again, a little bit less so. Probably a genuine second-best with five to one fair odds against him.

He walked again towards the Bayswater Road, fiddling with the clockwork mouse in his dinner-jacket pocket.

And the owners? Either of them, Cook thought, would be capable of anything.

Hock and Moselle? Corkscrew? Pig-man?

He stepped off the curb at the corner of Albion Street and a taxi honked and skidded.

Grudge, he thought, oblivious. Damned great three-inch nail. . . .

HE went over it all on Sunday morning, sitting up in bed in his orange pyjamas. The sheet was powdered with toast-crumbs; cigarette-ash drifted across the breakfast-tray. His third cup of coffee was cold and bitter and the milk had a soft white skin.

World's top two-year-olds meet at Longchamp said the first of his Sunday papers. The fellow went on to say that Larksong would win but eleven to eight was a rotten little price for a race still five weeks off.

Two dominate Charles de Gaulle said a second paper. This fellow went on to say that Toffee-Apple was the only danger he could see to Larksong. He reckoned that eleven to eight, though cramped odds, represented one of the best bets of the season.

Follow the wise money in French all-star tussle advised the third paper. This fellow ('The Man With The Straw In His Mouth') said a terrific quantity of dollars had gone on both favourite and second favourite. *The redoubtable Miss Robin DeFoe, purveyor-in-excelsis of aids to the female figure, wizardess of milady's boudoir, has bucked her own filly to the tune of - alas, she declines to reveal the sum. As for us, we feel that what's good enough for Miss DeFoe is good enough for us. Barring accidents, September 20th will see the chestnut daughter of Mulberry going to post with our shirt joining everybody else's on her elegant nose. . . .*

Barring accidents, ha, yes. and barring skulduggery, ho.

'Ho,' said Cook aloud, trying to brush the toast-crumbs from under his narrow behind.

Now Hock and Moselle had meant nothing to the Curtis girl and three-inch nail meant nothing to young Montevaresc. So if this was a big conspiracy they each knew only half of it. Why did they?

Or go at it another way. Who stood to gain by anything fishy? Not Robin DeFoe or anyone connected with Lark-song. Lough? Yes, but he did have a genuine second-best. He could sell Toffee-Apple tomorrow for more than he'd win from any but a gigantic bet, even if his colt beat Lark-song. Well, anybody who owned or had backed any of the others? Yes, them, any of those. Say it's the Venezuelans, or the Swedes. Couldn't visit all of them. Wouldn't help, probably.

Now the little Irishman knew about it, knew about it all. Disappeared without trace. And presumably those brutes in sandwich-boards knew about it all. Who were they? English? Foreign? Looked a bit foreign. Hired assassins? Venezuelan hired assassins?

Corkscrew, now. Forgotten that one.

There must be some kind of link between the little Irishman and the Curtis girl. And some different kind of link between him and Monteverese. And a link between him and one of the runners in the Charles de Gaulle? He was a tiny little man. Say an ex-jockey or a head lad. Then what was he doing running away? Who from? The Venezuelan assassins? Why? Grudge, now. Did someone have a grudge against him? Say they did. Say once upon a time he'd hooked a horse in a race, or spoilt a coup by selling the information. That would be why they conked him on the head, poor little beast. But what in God's name would that have to do with the race at Longchamp?

Cook had the feeling, pushing through this tangle of possibilities, of trying to walk through sodden bracken in boots with spurs. He thrashed angrily in the disordered bed, and the breakfast-tray toppled to the floor. He leant over the side of the bed and looked at the shambles in horror: egg-shells, marmalade, broken china, a dark pool of coffee and a thin drift of sugar.

He felt unable to move, and when his landlady hurried in to clear it all up he felt unable to talk.

After lunch he felt better. He read *Henry Esmond* and then

sang, along with Caruso, the duet from the Pearl Fishers. He made some calculations on the races at York. He did his lesson from St Hildreth's. He had a pork chop for dinner at his club. Before he went to bed he played, for a time, with his mouse.

At York he had heavy losing bets on both the Ebor and the Gimcrack. The big handicap on Wednesday was won by a four-year-old gelding with a very low weight, brilliantly ridden by an apprentice with a spotty, moonlike face. The two-year-old race on Thursday was won by a strapping bay filly belonging to a pork butcher from Leeds.

Cook stayed, as always, with some cousins called Paulton. They bored him: he horrified them. They gave a dinner party on the Wednesday and tried to keep him sober. But he tricked them, and went gustily asleep over coffee in the drawing-room.

He left after racing on Thursday, five hundred up on the meeting in spite of his losses.

'O God, oh God,' said Willa Paulton as the train clacked grittily away. 'Need we do that again?'

'Always have.'

'But need we again?'

'Custom, now.'

'*But need we again?*'

'No,' said Edwin Paulton, after twenty minutes' thought, as he stopped the car by their door. 'No, dare say not again.'

At Newmarket on Friday the sun was blazing, the going like dusty concrete, the fields small and the favourites long odds-on.

'Sorry about that frackass, Major,' said Laurie Love before the second.

'Not your fault.'

'I blame myself, sir.'

'No no, no need to.'

But Laurie was upset, for he liked the Major. Then

Cook won nine hundred on the two days and Laurie felt better about it.

The following Wednesday Cook was at Brighton, winning money. In the bar, full of self-congratulation after the third race, he saw Roly and his sister. The sister tried to draw Roly away, as though from a puddle or a dusty sweet dropped by a common child, but Roly evaded her and joined Cook by the coffee-machine.

'How's sleuthing, Desmond?'

'Damned baffling.'

'Clues?'

'Clues, yes, clues. They don't make any sense.'

'Tell me.'

Cook told him, in a quite coherent way, finishing with Robin's remarks about Lough.

'And is she right?' said Roly at the end. 'Is he a crook?'

'Oh yes,' said Cook slowly, 'yes I should think so.'

'And the woman?'

'Her too, I should say, certainly.'

'Both crooks? My God, Desmond, anything can happen.'

'That's the feeling I get. It's worrying, rather. They're both damned confident about the race. And as far as I can see she's got good reason and he hasn't.'

'Unless he knows something we don't know.'

'*Exactly.*'

'What is he, this Lough?'

'Some sort of millionaire. Something called pre-packed food.'

'Like Brekkiflakes?'

'No, I don't think he quite meant Brekkiflakes. He made rather a point of eggs. You buy them without the shells.'

'What's the point of that?'

'That's where I didn't altogether follow him.'

'Shouldn't think anyone would want to buy eggs without the shells. Would *you*?'

'No,' admitted Cook.

'So messy. Go stale, wouldn't you think? No no, your

friend's on to a dud there. I should think he's badly worried.'

'You think so?'

'Probably invested heavily - they really plunge, these Yanks - and now it turns out people don't want his eggs. Well, without the shells, would *you*? You ought to check up on that, Desmond.'

'How?'

'I'll tell you exactly how. You know my nephew Trevor?'

'One I met at Newbury?'

'*Even worse.* This one works in Fleet Street, for the *Daily Bugle*.'

'Reporter?' asked Cook with distaste.

'No no, grander. He does the bit about the City. Degrading thing - they have a drawing of him at the top of the column -'

'Good likeness?'

'Well, with a bowler hat on the side of his head.'

'Why?'

'I asked him that. I must say he was evasive, rather. I'll ring him up, shall I? Then you ring him up and go along and see him.'

'Good of you, Roly, thank you. But - ' Cook frowned, sipping his brandy and soda. 'Delighted to meet your nephew, of course. Don't quit - see *why*.'

'Because,' said Roly patiently, 'if this Lough's backed a dud, then he may be in trouble.'

'Follow you, yes.'

'Then that's a *very important clue*.'

'Why?'

'Good God, I don't know. Up to you to find out.'

'All right,' said Cook obediently.

Encouraged, he had a small, wild bet on the fourth race. His horse was well beaten, but he was still a thousand up on the day. This made his total nine thousand five hundred. Nearly enough for his big final bet: not quite, but nearly.

Trevor Southern put his coffee cup down on his desk.

Then he noticed with fury that it had dripped on his trousers, making an uneven line of dark blobs.

'Every single morning,' he said to Dilys, his secretary, 'you spill my coffee into the saucer -'

'Not much.'

'It's dripped again.'

'Your clothes are filthy, anyway.'

'All I ask is a dry saucer. Is it possible for you to cross the room without spilling my coffee? It's not a very wide room. Is that possible?'

'Why do you smoke those awful filter cigarettes?'

Trevor bent, in despair, to his tiny column. He was not an important member of the editorial staff: on a level, in the rigid protocol of staff Christmas parties, with the fishing editor; a little below the gardening and pets men; just above the canoeing correspondent. He spoke to the pools expert and the racing editor, but not (unless addressed first) the head of the enormous football staff or any of the senior reporters.

Climb on to the bandwagon [he wrote] of Britain's new boom. Next-egg minded? The days of the old sock and the sheaf of notes under the mattress are over, advise today's top industrialists -

The telephone rang.

'Hullo?'

'A Major Cook,' said the Hall Porter's voice. 'Reckons he has an appointment.'

'Thank you, yes, thank you. Dilys, will you go down and collect a Major Cook who is in Reception?'

'I'm filing,' said Dilys, putting down her cup and languidly opening the drawer of an old green cabinet.

'I can't go,' said Trevor.

'Why not?'

'I'm busy.'

'Not very.'

'Oh, all right, *this time*.'

In the great coppery lift Trevor tried to remember what Major Cook was about. Uncle Roly had rung up, unintelligibly, and then this other old throaty voice had rung up.

Uncle Roly was altogether too rich and positive: having lunch with him at his club was like going to the zoo but at the same time feeling more like an animal to be looked at than the animals being looked at. This Major Cook would be another frightening old tough with very shiny shoes. Well, thought Trevor, emerging from the lift into the grandiose reception hall, *I won't be patronized.*

A very tall old man in a blue suit was staring at the bronze bas-reliefs.

'Paper Knife in the three o'clock at Brighton,' the commissioner was saying, 'a good one, sir, really?'

'Think he'll win,' said the old man.

'Had a fancy meself for Rose Geranium.'

'Nice filly. See your point,' said the old man seriously. 'You could be right. Don't think so, though. Not on her Sandown running.'

'Well, sir, I'll take your word.'

'What's *that*?' said the old fool, pointing at a bronze allegorical figure, some forty feet high, holding a car in one hand and a biplane in the other.

'Spirit of Transport,' said Trevor, coming up to them. 'Odious, isn't it?'

'Here's Mr Southern, sir,' said the commissioner. 'Are you *sure* it's Mr Southern you want to see?'

'Oh *yes*. You're, ha, Roly's nephew? That Southern?'

'Yes.'

The old savage smiled. 'Splendid! How do you do?'

They shook hands. He seemed friendly, but Trevor had been caught before. They bit, these old beasts. As soon as you dropped your guard and talked naturally they ticked you off. This one had all the signs: Brigade tie, pale blue eyes, little red veins – he'd be merciless.

'Want to consult you,' he said, really almost respectfully. 'Confidential matter. Want an expert's view.'

'We'll go up to my office,' said Trevor. 'Or, no,' he added, thinking of Dilys and her disrespectful manner, 'what about a cup of coffee? They make quite a passable brew over the road –'

'Certainly, *excellent* idea.'

Cook had a chocolate éclair with his coffee. He told Trevor, over the pastel formica, of his interest in the food tycoon Lough.

'Lough,' said Trevor, 'ah yes. Amalgamated Provender.'

'Know anything about him?'

'I'll ring our Chicago office and find out all about him.'

'Can you really do that?' asked Cook, deeply impressed.

'Of course. It only costs a few pounds a second.'

'Good God.'

'Nothing to us.'

'Very grateful, really most grateful - '

'Why are you interested in Lough?'

'He's trying to buy some estates of mine - ah, a place called Jarrow up north and a French estate of mine at Monestier de Clermont - '

'And you think?' -

'Don't know what to think,' said Cook. 'Need guidance. Expert guidance.'

'I expect I can help you.'

'Got to consider my tenants.'

'One has, hasn't one? I am sure I can give you what you need.'

'Really most grateful, my dear fellow. Let me pay for the coffee.'

'No no, sir, my idea - '

'Insist.'

'Well, ha ha, thank you very much.'

'Get me Chicago,' said Trevor to the telephone.

'Get you,' said Dilys.

In the afternoon Cook won £1,300. Total now £10,800. Nearly enough. Not quite enough.

Charles de Gaulle - heavy betting [said a small headline on the front page of the *Sporting Life* on Friday]. *Seldom has a race abroad attracted such a volume of investment as this new invitation event at Longchamp. Sums wagered at all odds exceed money on even the Laurel Park Inter-*

national or the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe. . . . No official call-over, but a leading firm quotes the following as ruling at the Victoria Club yesterday evening:

11 to 8 Larksong

3 to 1 Toffee-Apple

7 to 2 Late Frost

5 to 1 Pelelandra

8 to 1 Julep and Lucky Jim.

And so on, thought Cook. Bad. If we go for Larksong we need another £10,000 to back her with. Might be done: difficult. Well, we obviously do go for Larksong. Except, if we do, what's all the fuss about?

Must know more. Hardly scratched the problem. Roly's nephew help? Feeble-looking chap, quite civil.

What about those other horses? Suppose one of them was really a three-year-old? No, be sensible. All been raced, all been seen. Or suppose Larksong and Toffee-Apple were both got at? No no, not very likely –

But that's what the business at Ascot pointed to – something like that. Skulduggery.

'Skulduggery,' said Cook aloud, shifting impatiently in the bedclothes.

A month to find out what the Irishman meant. Better get up. Well, another cup of coffee.

He sipped it, glaring at Bend Or.

At Windsor in the afternoon he won six hundred.

Before the fifth race he was leaning on the paddock rails watching a small field of handicappers being led round. He ticked the runners on his race-card – automatically, with little interest – and then stood up, straightening his back. He was beginning, as always, to ache all over from an afternoon's standing and walking. Then he saw, walking slowly past the crowd on the rails, the vice-mannered young Italian he had met at Lambourn.

'Good afternoon,' he called cheerfully.

'What? Oh, hullo, Mr –'

'Dempster. We me' at Gunn's Lodge.'

'I remember of course. Mr Dempster? I thought the name was -'

'Dempster,' said Cook firmly. 'Your stable's in quite nice form.'

'Jack has had some winners, I hear, yes. I have been at home, myself, in Italy.'

'Nice there, I expect, this time of year. But you came back -?'

'I came back this week.'

'Montevarese!'

'Yes?'

'Just trying to remember your name,' explained Cook. 'It's nice to see you again. Rather a sticky atmosphere, hm? Last time we met.'

'What *happened* that afternoon, Mr Brewster?'

'Dempster. Ah, I wish you could tell me.'

'You said something to Polly -'

'I mentioned a three-inch nail I thought I'd seen.'

'Was that it? And she flew over the handle.'

'Off. Yes. You've got no idea why?'

'I have been trying for a month to have some idea why. For a time, you understand, I blamed you.'

'I follow you, yes.'

'But that was stupid, of course. Myself I would blame, if I knew what I was supposed to have done. Polly I would blame, only -'

He looked puzzled and miserable. Cook felt sorry for the young man, who (though Italian) was a nice young man. But it was silly to let a thing like that stand in the way of his sleuthing.

'Hock and Moselle,' he said sharply, hoping for a reaction.

He got one. Montevarese grabbed his bicep, quite painfully. He looked very angry, and opened his mouth to say something. Then he shut it again, smoothed away his frown with a visible effort, and let go of Cook's arm.

'Yes?' said Cook. 'You were going to say?'

'Nothing.'

‘Hock and Moselle?’

‘It reminded me of something I was to do in London this morning. I was to order some wine. I forgot – it is most annoying.’

‘That’s all?’

‘Of course that’s all.’ The Italian’s face, which had been pleasantly open, was now closed. ‘Good-bye,’ he said shortly. ‘I have some people I must meet.’ He walked away.

Cook stood frowning at the ground. Perhaps, he thought, that was rather a mistake.

Mario strode along the front of the grandstand, seething. What does he know? *Cue cosa sa, quel vecchio cretino?* Hock and Moselle, of all things in the world, should be the most utterly secret. All his life he had been trying to keep them secret, and at the same time trying to forget them. If Polly ever knew! . . .

Cook did not move. He was exactly in the middle of the path between paddock and grandstand. People who were not looking bumped into him; people who were looking edged crossly round him.

This confirmed what he’d thought at Lambourn. Those two words made Montewhats not wild, then shut him up with a click.

‘Really,’ said a woman with a hat like a cow-pat, thudding softly into Cook’s back.

‘Takes all sorts,’ said her companion.

Now he owns Yellow Silk, and Hock and Moselle made him twitch like a Labrador having a dream. Yellow Silk, by Mulberry. And Larksong by Mulberry. Same sire, yes, known that all along of course. What other connexion? Where did Larksong come from? Italian, yes, like the other. That girl would know – the one with the nice black mouse at Robin DeFoe’s party. Horse-dealer’s wife. Celia O’. . .

‘Excuse me,’ said a woman with a hat like a Melton pie, shrill with pain, when her open-toes shoe cracked into Cook’s immovable foot. ‘I’m very sorry.’

‘Some people,’ said her companion.

O'Donaghue? O'Grady? O'Kelly? O'Keefe? It sounds, thought Cook, like a music-hall song - 'Here come the bhoys of the Ould Brigade, O'Connell, O'Connor, O'Brien, O'Toole.'

Her husband bought Larksong for Robin DeFoe. Bought her, presumably, in Italy. And she still was in Italy. Where in Italy? Did he buy her from the breeder? Or someone else who'd raced her in between? 'An odd business,' that girl said. He'd thought nothing of that at the time, but it might be important.

'Important,' said Cook aloud.

Better get hold of that girl. O'Something. Red hair, yes, tall girl, yes. Had a black mouse with a damned stupid name. A fast mouse, none the less. Celia O'. . .

Polly Curtis, coming out of the bar under the grandstand with the wife of an owner, came suddenly face to face with Mario.

Her heart seemed to jump into her throat and a roar of joy filled her brain.

'Polly,' he was saying, and she wanted to hug him till her arms dropped off. 'Polly, darling, listen -'

Then she remembered the thing he had done to them: crooked, filthy, unforgivable. To make a bit of money - easy slick clever money. Might easily wreck Jack's life, but pooh! never mind about that.

She walked past Mario, looking at the rooks over the elms in the smoky distance.

That evening, at Blazon's, Cook settled down with the London Telephone Directory, L-R. Remember, he thought, if I see it. O'Beirne, O'Boyle, O'Brady, O'Brian, O'Brien, O'Bryan, O'Bryen. God, he thought, take years. O'Byrne, O'Callaghan, O'Carroll, O'Casey. . .

He had another whisky and soda and his finger ploughed down the endless columns. O'Driscoll, O'Dwyer, O'Flanagan, O'Flynn. The page began to flicker and he had to go down a column twice and then a third time.

'O'Lane, O'Kearney, O'Keefe, O'Keeffe,' he chanted aloud.

Two members looked at each other, pursing their lips.

The page went pink and green and his eyes began to water. 'O'Leary, O'Loghlen, O'Loughlin -'

Perhaps it would come. He would have to let it come. Celia O' . . .

He jolted home in a taxi, trying to think of other things so that the name would edge into his mind. Some sort of silk garment she had, yes. Well, that was no help. Celia O' . . .

At Windsor on Saturday afternoon, under a dismal sky, he won just over £2,000 on the first two races. This made his credit (Laurie Love wrote it down for him) £13,356/3/10.

Enough, he thought, if it's anything but Larksong.

'Still not worried?' said George the clerk as Cook walked away.

'Nah,' said Laurie, 'you'll see, George.'

During the second race the rain began, vertical and persistent. Cook decided not to have any more bets, today or ever. He had his stake for his big bet: his last bet. All he had to do was to find out what to have it on.

He stood by the paddock rails before the fourth, his hat black with rain and his trouser-cuffs clinging to his ankles. An idea came to him, half-formed but woozily insistent, that he ought to talk to the religious sandwichmen again. There ought to be something they could tell him about the gangsters who tied them up: what they were like: whether they were Venezuelans or what. Perhaps they were here, as they frequented race-courses. Perhaps it was worth having a look, now that he had no betting to do. He set off down the course towards the cheaper enclosures.

Rain dropped off his big red hands and ran down his wrists into his sleeves. One of his shoes began to take in water. He lit a cigarette, but fat drops from his hat-brim made it soggy and unsmokable.

'Who give you all Yellow Silk at Ascot?' cried a voice like sweetened cocoa.

A huge West Indian in a yellow morning coat was appealing to a ring of race-goers. Behind him a very pretty black girl held up a golf umbrella.

'That lil Yellow Silk, you remember her, you people? She trotted in the front, and ever'body was surprised excepting the Emperor! An' we got another one like that now, in this very next race! Oh you people, trust the Emperor! Here in this hat I got itty bits of paper, and writing on that paper, and a name in that writing, and that's the winner of the next one, oh you people!'

The ring of small, wet people stared at him, faces utterly blank, not moving or talking. He chanted on, sometimes shouting, sometimes cooing and beaming with great white teeth. At last a woman in a pink cellophane shroud paid ten bob for his tip, then a diffident youth, and then others. When there were absolutely no more takers (but still a half-circle of silent watchers) Cook edged up to him and paid his ten shillings.

'You're a wise man, man,' said the Negro, 'you trust the Emperor.'

Cook unfolded his piece of paper. 'Scotch Tape,' he read. No chance at all by his reckoning. Then nor had Yellow Silk.

'Bad weather for you,' he said to the Emperor.

'I love this rain.'

'You need a drink after all that talk.'

'That is true.'

'Brandy weather, this. Have a glass of brandy.'

The West Indian beamed. 'What you want out of me, why, I don't know. But you want to buy me a drink, man, why you can.' He turned to the black girl. 'You stand just there, Princess.'

'She can come too,' said Cook.

'No, sir. You stand just there, little Princess.'

The Princess grinned with love and admiration, and lowered the golf umbrella so that it rested on her head like a giant hat.

'You say you gave Yellow Silk,' said Cook, two minutes later, in a comfortless concrete bar.

'Oh sweet Jesus, good luck, good luck,' said the Emperor, raising his glass to his enormous smile. 'I got me a lot of new friends that day.'

'What made you give her?'

'Information.'

'Where from?'

'That was a friend.'

'What friend? Have another drink.'

The Emperor smoothed the lapels of his wonderful coat. 'Can't think of any one reason I should tell you,' he said. 'Can't think of any one reason I shouldn't. That was an Irish friend. We see him on the course, yes, Princess and me. Hullo, Emperor. Hullo, man. Yellow Silk he says, like a voodoo man. Well, he know *all* about horses -'

'Little Irishman in a mackintosh?'

'That is so. I made me a million friends that day.'

'How do you come to know him?'

'He live next door my place in Westbourne Grove.'

'What's he called?'

'That I don't know.'

'Seen him recently?'

The Emperor stroked his massive polished chestnut jaw. 'Don't remember I have.'

'Where was it he lived?'

'642 is my number, he's next door. Ask for Doctor Chandra, the old landlord man. Look, he in trouble?'

'I don't know.'

The Emperor frowned. 'Him and me is friends. I don't know nothing about him, but we're friends. I don't want any kind of trouble to him.'

'I like him too. Owe him some money.'

'Yellow Silk?'

'That's right.'

'Man,' the Emperor slapped Cook's back in delight, 'that girl help us all.'

I I

‘DOCTOR CHANDRA?’

‘Yes?’

‘I am Inspector Cook of Scotland Yard.’

‘Come in, Inspector. I am always, always happy to co-operate with the gentlemen of the police.’

Doctor Chandra had a smooth golden-brown face and very shiny black hair. He led Cook into a room full of brassware, plush sofas, embroidered cushions and empty bird-cages. The daylight from the street came through layers and layers of yellow net curtains, giving the room an undersea but at the same time religious feeling. There was a smell of incense, paraffin and dust.

‘How can I serve you, Inspector?’

‘We are trying to trace a man who we have reason to suppose lived in your house, Doctor. An Irishman,’ Cook read from a notebook, ‘five foot two, sandy hair, blue eyes, age about forty –’

‘Yes yes. Such a man was a tenant of mine, Inspector. May I ask why you wish to find him? He is in trouble? He has committed some misdemeanour?’

‘No no,’ said Cook heartily, ‘no no no. Family trying to find him. His uncle in County Sligo has left him a herd of pigs.’

‘You lighten my mind. I was distressed to imagine him arraigned.’

Doctor Chandra relaxed and put a cigarette in a pink glass holder.

‘When did you last see him, Doctor?’

‘Fully six weeks ago. Yes, fully. He went one Saturday to the horse-racing.’

‘Ascot?’

'More than possibly. I am not, myself, a follower of the Sport of Kings -'

'What sort of shape was he in?'

'Shape, Inspector?'

'I mean worried? Scared?'

'Ah, I understand. He was worried, yes. He seemed to me a man suffering from what might almost have been, if you understand me, a paranoid state. He complained of being followed - yes, I remember that on one occasion, in his cups it is true, he assured me that he was being followed. Not an uncommon condition of mind, mark you, in this part of the capital city of what I still, perhaps foolishly, like to think of as the Empire.'

'What name did he go under, Doctor?'

'He was Terence O'Toole to those of us here to whom he vouchsafed his friendship. That was not, I imagine, his real name.'

'I imagine not. Can I see his room?'

'You have a warrant, Inspector?'

'No. I ask you as a favour.'

'Enough said, sir - one has one's duty as a patriotic Englishman.'

It was a horrid little room. There were racing papers, a crucifix, a brown fibre suitcase with a broken lock, which contained two flannel shirts and a pair of boots. The cold soapy water in the wash-stand had a thick layer of dust. A tiny, tattered pair of bedroom slippers lay under the wooden chair. When Cook coaxed and waggled the drawers from the varnished chest he found one more shirt, some dirty socks, a full bottle of Worthington and an empty packet of Woodbines.

The Irishman had been there some weeks before he disappeared. No one knew where he came from, what he was doing, or where he was going.

'Not much help,' said Cook, bitterly disappointed. 'Are you keeping this room for him? Expecting him back?'

'His rent was paid two months in advance,' said Chandra, 'somewhat atypically.'

'Ah, so you can't relet it.'

'To be utterly plain with you, Inspector,' said Chandra, suddenly smiling but becoming immediately serious again, 'I have endeavoured to let this room. But it is not, as you see, a beautiful room.'

'Not bad,' said Cook. 'Nothing wrong with it.'

He peered, thinking it would be policeman-like, under the bed and the chest of drawers. There, dark with greasy dust, he found a little pile of folders. He fished them out and rubbed them with his handkerchief. They were the neat, shiny brochures of a stud farm at Newmarket. One had, on the cover, a coloured photograph of the stallion Mulberry. Inside was printed his pedigree, a list of his winning progeny, and a statement of his fees. Another, a much fatter publication, listed the stud's broodmares, with their pedigrees and successes. Inside this were two typewritten sheets: blurred carbons, much folded and thumbled and splitting at the folds. One was Larksong's pedigree; the other was Yellow Silk's.

'Those papers interest you, Inspector?'

'Very much,' said Cook thickly. 'Can I take them?'

'I am not certain of the law, but I imagine not.'

'No,' said Cook. 'All right. The fellow's property, of course. I'll just make a note.'

He wrote down: Greenaway Stud, Newmarket.

He rang up the Greenaway stud at lunch-time.

The American readers of *Horse and Buggy Magazine*, he told the owner, were most interested in Mulberry. And they would love an article about a really well-run English stud. Could he, Dempsey, come and take some photographs?

He could, of course. They would meet him at Newmarket Station on Tuesday morning.

On Monday morning Cook's telephone rang.

'Hullo?'

'Trevor Southern talking.'

'Who? Who? Who?'

Very slowly Cook remembered. Trevor lost a lot of face with Dilys as he explained, slowly and often, who he was.

'Ah yes, my dear fellow, very kind of you to ring up.'

'We've got the stuff on Lough.'

'Stuff on Lough. Rather funny that.'

'Our man in Chicago and our people in New York have uncovered the dope you want.'

'It's very civil of them to bother.'

Lough was in trouble. Trevor barked the details in a new, urgent voice which Cook found difficult to follow: but it was clear that Lough was in trouble.

'He's a manufacturer who tried to be a money-man,' rapped Trevor. 'Take-over fights, speculation - you know the pattern.'

'Pattern?'

'He's up to his neck. The tax boys are after him and the Anti-Trust boys are after him and there's something about a prospectus my contacts don't like - boy, he's in deep.'

'You mean,' said Cook, groping, 'he's short of money?'

'That's a good part of it. My contacts say that he can probably get out from under this one if he can raise the money fast.'

'Lot of money?'

'Lot of money. They think he'll just about find it. He's got friends.'

'I'm *sure* he has,' said Cook politely.

'Finance in the big leagues is a very tough game. Lough didn't measure up. Now if he'd just stayed a respectable pork-canner -'

'*Pork-canner?*'

'One of the biggest. Solid firm, well run, big profits. But he had to get Napoleonic and build up Amalgamated, and now, by God, he's -'

'You mean he put pork into tins?'

'Cans, yes.'

'Pork from pigs?'

'Hogs. They call them hogs in Chicago.'

Trevor barked on, and presently Cook thanked him

warmly and hung up and lit a cigarette with shaking purple hands.

'If Yellow Silk wins today, don't look further than the pig-man.' That's what the Irishman said. So Toffee-Apple was the one. And at threes: thirty-three thousand to eleven. Perfect. A beautiful bet.

But why is Toffee-Apple the one? What's wrong with Larksong?

Cook stared at his bedroom slippers (a pinkish check on a fawn ground) and began to walk to and fro across the prickly green carpet.

What's wrong with Larksong?

At Blazon's, after dinner, he saw in *Country Life* a photograph of a small stone manor house in Dorset. Near Blandford. Beautiful country – he knew it: quiet, rich, warm, with thick woods on the hillsides and comfortable mud in the valleys. Ninety acres and an old walled garden. 1732, with original fireplaces. On the market for the first time since the early nineteenth century. A long, long way from any race-course. Cook ached for this property. He ached for his £30,000.

'O'Mahoney,' he suddenly said aloud.

The eight other members in the room looked up sharply. One dropped his *Daily Mirror* and one dropped his drink. Cook stumped out to the telephone-room and pulled down L-R again.

Not many O'Mahoneys. He tried them in order. After only three puzzling conversations with Irishmen and one Levantine he recognized the red-haired girl's voice. They lived in London, then; one piece of luck.

'Cook,' he said.

'What?'

'I mean Goldsmith. I beat your mouse.'

'Yes, of course, Professor.'

'Your husband bought Larksong for Robin DeFoc, right?'

'That's right, but –'

'I've got a friend,' said Cook cleverly, 'a South African called Jansen, who wants to get hold of a yearling.'

'I'm sure Paddy can fix him up.'

'My friend is *very rich*.'

'Good,' said the girl. 'What kind of thing -'

'He wants something bred more or less like Larksong'

'There are plenty more like her where she came from. As a matter of fact I believe there's a full brother.'

'Where?'

'At the same stud. San Ruggiero, near Turin.'

'That's where your brother got Larksong?'

'That's it, Professor.'

'Whose is that?'

'It's an old lady called the Principessa Montevarese.'

'Is it, by God?' said Cook softly. 'Is it? You told me it was an odd business, buying Larksong.'

'Oddish.'

'I only ask because I don't want to involve my friend Jansen in anything -'

'Oh, you won't. The Larksong affair was unique, I should think. For one thing we had to stop the Princess from finding out who the buyer was -'

'Why?'

'Robin's reputation. It would have shot the price up to the moon.'

'She must know by now.'

'She does indeed. She nearly had Paddy burnt at the stake - because, you see, of the price she thought she could have got. Anyway she got in a rage and made a damned awkward proviso -'

'Still the Princess?'

'Still the old Princess. She insisted on keeping the horse at San Ruggiero, training her there, and not handing her over till the end of the season.'

'Possibly wise. Not uncommon.'

'The sale very nearly fell through. Thank God we persuaded Robin, but she wasn't very pleased and I think that's why she sacked us.'

'So Larksong,' said Cook thoughtfully, 'is where now?'

'San Ruggiero. The stud and the training-stable are next door.'

'There's nothing - strange about the Princess? What?'

'How do you mean, strange?'

'I'm just thinking of my friend Jansen.'

'Yes, I see. Well,' the girl paused, 'no, far from it, really. She looks weird, but she's perfectly - you know - well-known and respectable. Then, let's think, they had a pretty total change-over of staff there recently, but that's nothing too extraordinary, is it?'

'Why did they do that?' asked Cook. 'Any idea why?'

'None at all. I gather she's very tyrannical, old Princess M.'

The girl could tell him nothing else interesting. Presently he said, 'I'll tell Jansen to ring you up when he gets to London, then, shall I?'

'Do,' said the girl, 'and I'm sure Paddy will be able to fix him up.'

Grudge, thought Cook, hanging up slowly. Might the Princess nurse a grudge, feeling she'd been cheated out of the price she might have got? This Princess, now. Tyrannical, looks weird, changes her whole staff all of a sudden. What does all that mean?

And the Princess bred Larksong as well as Yellow Silk. Mulberry, their site, stood at Newmarket - the stud he was going to see tomorrow. So the Princess had sent both mares to him two years ago. And presumably the little Irishman was there at the time - that's where he got those folders and pedigrees, and that's how he knew what he knew.

Getting very warm, thought Cook.

Later Celia O'Mahoney told her husband about Jansen, the South African millionaire who wanted a yearling.

'How did you get to hear about him?'

'This professor. He rang up.'

'How do you come to know a professor?'

'I met him at that party of Robin's, Come to think of it, Robin threw him out. Damn, I'd forgotten that.'

'Why? Tight?'

'She called him a string of names. He gatecrashed the party, I think. And he turned out not to be a professor, even.'

'What shall we do? Warn the Princess?'

'Well,' said the girl, 'do you dare?'

'No.'

'No. Anyway, Jansen may be all right.'

'*There,*' said Keith Rutley, 'lovely photograph.'

Cook obediently pointed his camera at Mulberry, who was going back from his paddock to his box.

They had pottered round the stud for an hour, seeing the two stallions, the mares and foals, and a sad group of barren mares. Cook had snapped away at the covering-yard and the plunging-ring, at the stud-groom (who was impatient), and at the owner, the red-faced affable Rutley (who posed delightedly, all the time, turning his better profile to Cook's empty camera).

'Now come and see the yearlings.'

They got into the Land Rover and bumped to a big sloping paddock beyond a small dark wood, Rutley banged the rail with his stick and the shy, leggy little horses tit-tapped towards them. They climbed through the rails and the yearlings nibbled their sleeves and then backed away in sudden, momentary alarm, tails swishing and huge soft eyes rolling childishly.

'Those two,' said Cook. 'Very alike.'

This was a pair of chestnuts, one standing with his ears back and one trotting backwards and forwards, a few yards away, on his own.

'Aren't they? Both Mulberry.'

'Take after him.'

'He stamps his stock, yes, I'm glad to say.'

'Confusing, hm? Having two so alike?'

'You should have seen a couple we had a year ago. Two

fillies, both Mulberry again. They were id-ent-ic-al! That was a bore, if you like.'

'Yes? How were they bred?'

'Italian mares, both. Same owner, in fact, old Jeannie Montevarese - '

'Long way to send a mare.'

'Ah, not nowadays. One was, er, Yellowhammer - not much of an animal. And then a beauty called Larkspur.'

'She has a daughter they say is good - '

'Larksong, yes. Brilliant. Hope she wins this race at Longchamp - do old Mulberry a bit of good. She was one of the fillies I was talking about. I see Jeannie finally did sell her - she tried to sell the lot of them here - '

'Ah?'

'First she wanted to sell both mares in foal, then she wanted to sell the mares with the foals, then she tried to sell them as yearlings. Kept them here all that time. Bore, that, in a way. The groom who'd travelled with them stayed here over a year, for instance. Nice little man he was, but all the same - '

'Irish?'

'Yes,' said Rutley, surprised. 'Skinny little chap. Pat something. Well, backwards and forwards they went to the sales, but she put such a nonsensical great reserve on them that no one bought, of course. Silly, if she wanted the cash. Some woman from Texas might have, I suppose - '

'One, ha, much better than the other?'

'Naturally - difference between the dams. That's what made it such a perfect nuisance their being so much alike. Suppose they'd got mixed! Doesn't do to think of. If you had them side by side you could tell them apart, just. If you knew them well. One on its own - you couldn't tell which it was. Well, until the bashing.'

'Bashing?'

'Ghastly business. April or thereabouts last year. The fillies were in this paddock then, the colts were over there. I was showing some people round the place - let's think, a girl, and - '

‘What girl?’

‘Jack Curtis’s sister. Pretty little thing. Molly, Dolly, something of the kind. Dreadful for her, it was. She was wearing a damned great red woolly beret – you know the sort of thing. Looked fine, give her that. But the fillies didn’t like it, or one of them didn’t. We were standing just here, the fillies were there – oh, eight, I should think. The girl just nods her head and one of them bolts. Well, that started them all off, of course, and they went away up the hill towards that corner –’

It was a dark corner, three hundred yards away. The tangled yews and hazels of the little wood overhung the paddock and the rails were almost invisible.

‘They didn’t see the fence till they were on to it. And it was wet – been raining a lot. It was muddy up there under the trees – a real skid-pan. I could see two chestnuts going along in front, hell of a gallop, and then one of them hit the rails. Never in all my life heard such a bang. Then they were off again, down to the bottom there and round and round. One of the chestnuts was going a bit short – I was worried stiff. And we couldn’t get near them for a hour to see which it was or do anything about it – they panicked properly, of course, terrified! Well, we nipped up to the place – come along, I’ll show you –’

One of the rails had been broken clean through, Rutley said. Its leverage had uprooted a post.

‘And a damned great nail was sticking out of the wood – lethal-looking thing – bent, rusty, horrible! I say, don’t for God’s sake put anything about this in your article, will you? I’ve had all this fencing renewed since then and I don’t think it could happen again –’

‘No no,’ Cook promised.

‘And of course, wouldn’t you know, that damned nail caught the Mulberry one out of Larkspur – the best of the lot – Larksong.’

‘Good God.’

‘Nasty little gash. Clean, thank God. Vet fixed it. That poor girl was in a terrible state – blamed herself, *you* know.

Healed up beautifully, though. Didn't affect her at all. Look how she ran at Rome.'

'Leave a scar?' asked Cook, struggling to sound casual.

'Tiny one. Hardly see it.'

'None of the others get hurt?'

'One useless bay animal got a sort of bruise.'

'But not the one out of Yellowhammer?'

'No no, she wasn't touched.'

A switch, thought Cook, thundering back towards London. A bloody switch. Oldest cheat in racing. That's Larksong they've got at Gunn's Lodge. No wonder she won at Ascot. That scar – that's what the little Irishman saw in the paddock. And that's what the Curtis girl went out to look for when I said about a three-inch nail.

Swear the trainer doesn't know. Swear he doesn't know.

The girl, of course, she thinks Monteverese did the switch. That's why she hates his guts – if the Jockey Club found out they'd take Curtis's licence away for ever. But Monteverese didn't have a big bet at Ascot. Nobody did – the filly ran virtually unbacked. Surely he would have if he'd known. There could be no other point in doing the thing. On the other hand Hock and Moselle made him jump like a guilty flea. Puzzling.

Get this straight. Larksong ran in Italy, won like mad, and then came to England pretending to be a fourth-class selling-plater called Yellow Silk. Then the one they're running at Longchamp is Yellow Silk! Useless! Hasn't a chance!

So, yes, pig-man is right. Toffee-Apple will win. Magnificent tip. Killing of a lifetime.

But this is mad. *Why* work a switch like that? Run a good one instead of a bad one, yes. But run a bad one instead of a good one? *Why?*

The little Irishman – he discovered the switch and they found out and got him. Who, though? And for God's sake why? Why? Why?

Too mad, thought Cook, too mad to bank on. Must be

sure. Have to have another look at Yellow Silk – the one they call Yellow Silk. Creep in there, look for the scar, if we see it back Toffee-Apple and buy that farm and live like a gentleman and die in a decent bed. . . .

How do we get to the horse? Openly? Hopeless – get pitched out at the bottom of the drive. Stealth, then. Rubber-soled shoes and a little torch like a fountain-pen. And a mask, thought Cook nervously. Better have a mask.

The following morning he bought a little torch like a fountain-pen and made a mask out of an evening sock.

In the evening he caught a train to Newbury and sat, in a funk but excited, planning his tactics.

It was childishly easy.

Cook left his taxi at the bottom of the drive and padded delicately up the grass verge. Fifty yards from the stables he stopped and put on his mask. He remembered the right stable-block and crept along the row of doors, using his little torch on the name-tag by each.

'Yellow Silk,' neatly typed on a card, in a brass sleeve, behind a bit of celluloid. It was right at the end, so that he could bolt into the darkness.

He switched off his torch and stood for a moment to congratulate himself.

It was a breezy night: branches thrashed and groaned and a chimney-cowl squeaked, hiding minor noises. Dark: there would be a moon later, but bustling cloud snow hid most of the stars. The lights were off in the house, a hundred yards away. In the head lad's cottage, between house and stables, one window was still yellowly shining: a low, quiet lamp behind flowered curtains.

Six feet away, beyond the thick oak door with the heavy bolt, the horse shifted and rustled. Yellow Silk, the card said. The fabulous Larksong, the best two-year-old in Europe.

Talk to her through the bars for a minute, thought Cook. Don't want her frightened and kicking up a fuss. Have some sugar ready, yes. Then ease the bolt open and nip in and shut the door again. Chat some more and another lump of sugar. Scar's on the near side of the chest, low down, beside the leg-muscle.

Last-minute check. Sugar? Check. Torch? Check. Everything still quiet? Check. Light's gone off in the cottage. Bye-byes for the head lad, up early, sleep well.

Cook padded back, round the corner of the block, to have

a last careful look round. His foot caught the corner of a bale of fresh straw. He lost his balance and put out a hand to save himself. He grabbed, instead of the top of the bale, the handle of a wheelbarrow, which tipped and upended with a crash. Cook staggered, unbalanced and panicky, and fell half across the bale and rolled. He caught a broom-handle, which jumped away and rapped a bucket. He flailed his legs and then collapsed into a coil of hose-pipe. Buckets clanged and thundered. A dog began to bark. The horses whinnied and stamped.

Get out of here, Cook thought. But he could not move. Sitting still in the train, then tripping and falling about, had put his back out and he was stuck. He kicked his legs and waved his arms and heaved at his long thin body, but he stayed lying across the hosepipe, mask awry, desperate.

God, thought Cook, drumming his heels with rage, what a damned untidy stable.

Back broken? Paralysed? Slipped disc? Hurt like hell.

Stuck here for ever.

Lights were going on, people were shouting, footsteps crashed. All the dogs in Berkshire began to bark.

Berkshire barking, thought Cook insanely, struggling to move but pinned and powerless.

A brilliant light suddenly dazzled him. He stared up helplessly. His mask had rolled into a string but he still clutched his lumps of sugar.

'So,' said a girl's cold voice.

'Good evening,' Cook tried to say, but only a high, thin noise came out.

'Stand up.'

'I can't.'

'*Stand up.*'

'Good God,' said Cook pettishly, 'don't you think I would if I could?'

His eyes were becoming used to the glare. An elderly lad with a mackintosh over his pyjamas held the torch. Polly Curtis held a double-barrelled shot-gun.

'That thing loaded?'

'Both barrels. Number four shot.'

'Here, you haven't got it cocked, have you?'

'Yes, I have.'

"'Never let a loaded gun',", chanted Cook, seriously frightened, "'Pointed be at anyone" - '

Presently Jack Curtis and some other men arrived. They pulled Cook brusquely to his feet. He shouted with pain and rage, but his spine clicked back into position. They bundled him along a path to a garage and propped him against a small tractor. There was a short, violent argument between the Curtises, after which Jack went off to telephone and Polly stayed on guard with the twelve-bore.

'I expect you want an explanation,' said Cook at last.

'No,' she said with indifference. 'The judge may.'

'Making fools of yourselves, I'm afraid. No wish to be offensive - '

'No!'

'Perfectly innocent. Looking for a moth. Ha, Lesser Pork-canner. Curious name, isn't it? Common in America, native to the Middle West, very few specimens recorded over here. . . .'

His voice dwindled and died. He and Polly stared at each other: he in the tight white beam of the torch, she in semi-darkness, holding the gun and frowning.

The beam danced and flickered as the stable-lad shifted the torch to his other hand. The dark floor was cold and gritty and there was a smell of concrete and tractor-oil. Cook shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. Immediately the muzzle of the gun, which had sagged a little, came sharply up again to point at his stomach.

Number four shot, thought Cook. Make a bloody great hole if she looses off. And she looks as though she might. Looks absolutely murderous. Guilty! thought Cook. She knows I've found her out and she's damned well guilty!

Polly felt murderous. The gun was comforting: the smooth, damp-feeling barrels heavy in her left hand, the single trigger under her right fore-finger. This horrible old man couldn't do much now. But he knew! He'd known

when he came before, and he'd come again to make certain. Why? Blackmail?

Those awful watery knowing blue eyes and that dreadful veiny nose. Disgusting old beast. Blackmail, yes, of course. He'd come to make certain it was Larksong in the stable; then he would have put the bite on poor little Jack – every penny, for years and years.

But it wouldn't have worked, even if he'd got to the horse. Polly would have killed him first.

The very worst part of it was that she couldn't tell Jack. The moment he knew about the switch that dirty Wop prince had worked. . . . A picture of Mario at Windsor, with dark pleading eyes and calling her name, made her, suddenly, groggy with longing. The gun waggled and drooped. Then the old spy coughed and she came back to life with a jolt. Yes, the moment Jack knew about the switch he'd confess. Foolishly honest, he was, ludicrously honest. His life would crash and he'd never again do the job he loved, but it wouldn't occur to him not to tell the Jockey Club. Running a ringer at Ascot! – they'd crucify him. Therefore he must never know. Therefore it must never come out. Never! This hateful old man with his pink-rimmed beady eyes. . . .

'How much money were you after?' she asked sharply.

'Thirty thousand,' said Cook absently, thinking with anguish how nearly he had been able to be certain.

Polly's finger twitched on the trigger.

'Miss Polly,' gasped the lad with the torch.

'All right, Fred. Don't worry.'

'You'll not shoot the old bastard in cold blood?'

'No,' sighed Polly, 'not unless he bolts.'

'Ah, if he goes and bolts, give un a left and right.'

Cook blew his nose – carefully, so they would not think he was going to bolt – and leant unhappily on the knobbly bonnet of the tractor.

Presently he was in a cell.

The police had been massive and sombre. No one at Gunn's Lodge had had any idea what Cook could be after;

he himself had stuck to his moth-hunting story. He had lost his net, he said, in a hedge. *Horse and Buggy Magazine* particularly wanted a properly authenticated report of the Lesser Pork-canner moth. . . . But no one had believed any of this. The obvious theory was that he was trying to get at a horse: drug it: nobble it. But neither Yellow Silk nor any of the other horses in the block were running for the next few days. And no drugs had been found on Cook when he was searched: nothing sinister except the sugar, and he had proved its innocence by eating it.

As they put him in his warm grey cell he explained that they were making a serious mistake which they would certainly regret. They looked at him with great sad faces and locked the cell door and clumped away.

'Hi!' he called. 'Officer!'

'Shut up,' said one, without rancour, turning and plodding back. 'What is it?'

'What happens to me now?'

'Up to magistrate in the morning.'

'What will he do?'

'If he believes you he'll let you go, likely. Myself and personally, I don't think he'll believe you. Mr Curtis, he'll give evidence, see, and Miss Curtis, she'll give evidence -'

'What happens if he doesn't believe me?'

'Ho, remanded in custody, that'll be it. Police make inquiries then, see, find out who you are and what you're up to.'

'How long?'

'Maybe a week, maybe more. What *were* you up to?'

'Hunting moths.'

'Ooh, you wicked old man,' said the policeman amiably. 'Sleep well.'

They woke Cook very early and gave him tea in an enormous white mug. He had breakfast, which he quite enjoyed, and they encouraged him to wash and shave, Then the hours dragged. At last, just before eleven, they came for him.

'This him?' said an inspector.

'Denston,' said Cook. 'Doctor Denston.'

'Doctor? Disgrace to your profession, you are.'

'Not medical practitioner. Scientist. Lepid . . . ha, expert on insect life.'

'Specialize in horse-flies, eh? Har har,' shouted the inspector. 'Get it, Wilkins? I say he specializes in horse-flies!'

'Har,' said a policeman tragically.

They went up some steps and along a lot of corridors: dark green doors, chocolate-brown walls, a smell of ink and disinfectant. At last they came to a small room with a heavily-barred window. There were two other prisoners (men of a low type, Cook thought) and a dozen policemen. These had all taken their helmets off while they waited. Their heads were cropped and their necks looked juvenile and spotty.

There was another long, long wait.

Some of the policemen stared at the wall, as though attaining remote and mystical conditions of trance. Some discussed their gardens and the county cricket championship. Their sentences were short and burred and there were comfortable gaps of silence between question and answer. A fat green fly buzzed and thudded on the window, swinging slowly among the bars.

Cook took out his little torch and absently screwed and unscrewed its back.

'Nervous?' said a policeman.

Cook considered the question. 'Yes,' he said finally.

'Ar. Thought so. Fiddling like that, 'ee, always shows.'

Cook put his torch away and sat on his hands, ashamed.

Just over a fortnight, he thought. Can't risk being bottled up here. Have to escape, yes, certainly. Almost at once. Make a plan.

He looked round at the big, solemn policemen. What a lot of them! Rotten waste of the ratepayers' money, keeping them all sitting about like this. One each side of him, eight between him and the door. Despair, like a weight on his head, pushed him down on to the bench and filled him with self-pity.

All his trouble, all his cleverness for nothing – all his *aliases* and ingenuity and time and outlay, his big stake all ready, his almost-completed knowledge. . . . By God yes, he thought, I have been clever. Be clever again. He sat straighter and began to think furiously. After a moment he took out his torch again and began screwing and unscrewing its back.

‘Still nervous?’ said the policeman with a slow, fat grin.

‘Yes,’ said Cook firmly.

He took out the two little batteries and rolled them to and fro on the palm of his hand. Ever-ready. Ha, so they were.

The fly circled the room, then homed again on the window. Two policemen were discussing cucumbers, slowly and with no interest. The time dragged by.

At last they came for Cook.

Two policemen escorted him out of the room and round a corner. They began to climb a flight of steep stone stairs. As Cook’s head came level with the top he saw a big wide-open door. Sunlight poured in and there were the friendly noises of the great beloved world outside: traffic and motor-horns, bicycle-bells and a whistling boy.

Cook paused, clutching his back and groaning. The policemen just behind him waited considerately.

There were two more policemen outside the door. They stood with their feet wide apart and their hands behind their backs. One stared gravely up towards the brilliant sky; one stared downwards at the hot white stones.

Cook climbed another two steps, then groaned again and leaned forward.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘The old back.’

When he stood up again he left one of the torch-batteries on the smooth stone step. He went on up, nearly to the top. His heart pounded. God, make them step on it. Please God, make them step on it.

There was a bellow behind him, of rage and terror. He stopped and turned. The higher of the policemen had fallen forward and was now skidding down, flailing with his legs. He brought down the other and they began to roll,

only checking a few steps from the bottom. The noise of their crashing hobnails and their shouts of pain rang along the corridors, astounding Cook.

'Help!' he called, 'officer, help!'

He put the other battery down on the step two from the top and then flattened himself against the wall. The two policemen at the door trotted massively to the top of the stairs and looked down in horror.

'Help,' repeated Cook invitingly.

They started down. The first missed the booby-trap. The second trod on it firmly, did a brief, convulsive dance, and then crashed downwards into his colleague. The two policemen at the bottom, recovered and already furiously climbing, were skittled over. Other policemen, dozens, appeared in the corridor below and ran for the stairs. Some tried to disentangle the heap of thrashing blue by the bottom step, some to climb over it and chase Cook. None could: but Cook saw they would soon be able to. So he turned and ran out into the sun. A whistle screamed behind him. He turned left and ran - dazzled by the sun, still very frightened, but exultant.

Suddenly he was in the middle of a market: stalls, thick crowds, the shouts of squat men selling cheap carpets and pink rayon petticoats. Another whistle sounded behind him. He crouched as he trotted, dodging among the stalls. In front of him, just moving off, he saw a small van with its back doors open. He scrambled in and collapsed on a load of vegetables in boxes. The van gathered speed. In the market street behind half a dozen policemen appeared. They turned a corner. He was beginning to congratulate himself when the van slowed and stopped. Again a whistle sounded behind. He peered out: it was a traffic-light. They'd look in a van like this. . . . Beside the van, parked, there was a big shiny car. No one in it. Passenger's door open. Suitcase in the back seat, and a big check rug. Man and woman buying some flowers from a stall - yes, their car. Cook got painfully out of the van and slipped into the back seat of the car. He wriggled down in front of the seat and covered

himself with the rug. The engine was running – good, off any minute. There were hoarse policemen's shouts all round. He held his breath: but then, choking, had to release it in a rattling sigh that terrified him. He could hear a policeman's boots and breath and then blasphemy a few feet from his head. His elbow began to itch, but he dared not scratch it. His face seemed to be pressed into fluff and biscuit-crumbs. The little torch was wedged miserably under his hip-bone. The policeman seemed to move away; he began very slow and cautious movements to scratch, to move the torch, to rearrange his face. Then he froze again as squeaks and rustles just above his head indicated that the passenger had got in.

'Ta,' said a woman's voice.

The car door slammed and then the driver got in and slammed his door.

'Lovely they are,' said the woman. 'I'll put them in the back seat, shall I?'

'Put them where you like, dear,' said a man's voice jovially, 'ha ha.'

The woman made a disapproving click. There was a chorus of creaks and twangs as she twisted and kneeled; then a prickly, rustling bundle landed on the rug on Cook's head.

'I do love roses,' said the woman. 'They're a picture, those.'

'Roses for my English rose,' said the man. 'Heigh-ho for London, then.'

The car rolled off.

Giggles Ballantyne quite enjoyed the drive.

The thin, cool rush of air from the little window in front of the proper window was a relief, and when Norman was driving he didn't like to talk much and that was a bit of a relief too. He wasn't what you'd choose for a week's touring about. But when he'd said a week in the West Country, best hotels everywhere, all on the firm, she'd jumped at it. Without *seeming* to. London got so hard and steamy and dazzling – enough to give you a headache all the time. So off they'd

gone with Norman's samples. Plymouth, Exeter, Taunton, Bristol, back by Newbury. And it all seemed better, somehow, Norman's line being what it was – novelty jewellery, little brooches and birds and all sorts, ever so pretty, mostly eighteen carat. She kept thinking he'd give her something, but he hadn't. She realized now he wouldn't give her anything. He was mean. Well, those roses, yes. Five bob's worth, on the last day, and that was the lot. He was one of those people who thought their company was present enough for any girl. Full of himself, oozing. No good at night, even. They'd stayed in some lovely hotels and had some lovely rooms, and Giggles did her best. But this Norman – first he was nervous and then he got cross. And his manners! – very unrefined. Then again he was paying for everything, or his firm was. Always make allowances when a man pays for everything.

They were through Maidenhead, in one of the brief bits of country between there and London, when Norman stopped the car.

'Got to see a man about a dog,' he said, opening his door.

'All righty.'

'Taking a stroll yourself?'

'No, ta. I'll sit still.'

'That's right,' he said, getting out. 'Don't talk to any strangers.'

He crossed the grass verge, went up a short lane into a field, and disappeared behind a hedgerow.

Giggles leaned back, waiting passively. After a moment she swivelled the rear-view mirror so that she could look at herself. She fiddled with a golden curl and wondered if she needed lipstick. No, won't bother now. Soon enough when we get there. *If* we get there – where's that man? What's he been drinking, to take so long?

She pushed the mirror back again, but not far enough. It gave her a view into the back seat, and filling it, suddenly, there was a face! Evil, purple, glaring, mad, with wild hair and dust on its cheeks. Giggles screamed and struggled with the door-handle. She felt the creature's hand on her

shoulder. She screamed again and got the door open. She almost fell out of the car and stumbled across the grass and into the field.

Norman was still busy into the hedge. He twisted away from her, horrified.

'Ooh, pardon,' panted Giggles, averting her eyes. 'But Norman, Norman, there's something in the back -'

'Just a minute -'

'It touched me!'

'Just a minute -'

They heard the car start and then drive off.

'Oh Norman,' cried Giggles.

'Wait a minute,' said Norman in agony, 'I got to finish -'

He adjusted his dress and they ran to the road. The car had already disappeared.

Cook had not driven a car, nor had a driving licence, since 1937. He remembered the self-starter business and the foot-controls, but gears bothered him. At first, for a sickening moment, he had looked in vain for the gear-lever. Then he had cleverly guessed that it might be the little handle under the steering-wheel. He had selected third, by chance. The car had moved off with horrible uncertainty, but once it had got up speed it seemed to go along all right. It wasn't in top gear, Cook realized, but he didn't dare try to change it. He would stay like this till he stopped.

Which had better be soon, he thought. They'll stop another car and get on to the police and I'd better be out of this by then.

A few minutes later, after a brief nightmare in the traffic, he steered cautiously into the station yard at Slough. No room to park. Yes, just possibly there. He stepped on the brake and the car stalled. A van hooted behind. He pressed the self-starter, treading on the accelerator, and the car lurched forward, tipping over a Lambretta and crunching into a mauve saloon. He scrambled out, then leant into the back seat and picked up the roses and a man's fawn felt hat.

He put on the hat, which settled over his ears like a cowl, held the roses in front of his face, and ran to the ticket office.

Ten minutes later he was in a first-class carriage going to London.

God, he thought, what a rotten car. Typical modern stuff. Impossible gears, and the least tap on the side makes a great dent. Typical shoddy stuff.

He still clutched his roses, and the soft fawn hat rested loosely on his ears.

Well now, is that Larksong? Probably. Almost certainly. *Almost* absolutely certainly. But we can't bet eleven thousand on an 'almost'. Got to be sure. Very well, have to go to Italy. Nothing else for it.

Expense? Ha, money no problem. Got a nice adequate working capital for once. Sensible to invest a bit of it in making sure.

Besides, rather nice to get out of the country for a day or two. What do they give you for tripping up a hobby? What do they give you for pinching a car? Five years? Too long. Can't spare that amount of time.

The train stopped at a suburban station and Cook got out. Might be police at Paddington, probably not here.

There were none; he took a tube and presently reached his flat.

He washed and changed and then smoked a cigarette and wondered how one set about going to Italy. Travel Agent, he thought. There was one in the next street. He walked round there, and they said it was all perfectly easy. They did some telephoning, and then said there was a place on a B.E.A. Viscount the following morning, Friday, going to Milan. Train to Turin. Taxi where you like. He gave them a cheque and then went to Blazon's for many drinks before dinner.

He went to bed early and slept with the dreamless ease of a good digestion and a clear conscience.

13

In the morning Cook took a taxi to the Gloucester Road Air Terminal.

Tickets, passport, money, lire – everything, yes. The travel agency had sent tickets and currency round by messenger early in the morning; Cook had taken a kinder view of life in the post-war world.

Police at the airport, looking for him? He thought not. He had read, often, of ports and things being watched, but he doubted if his crimes fell into that sort of category. The things he had done were really only practical jokes. They would all laugh about it together one day – one afternoon at Newbury races, perhaps, over a drink in the bar – he, the police, the owner of the car. . . . He thought about the car at Slough Station and his vision of a merry reunion faded.

Well, if they were watching he ought to get by. He had taken pains to look as different as possible from yesterday. He wore his blue racing suit instead of tweeds, a different tie, shiny black shoes, sun-glasses. He had glued his sparse hair uncharacteristically down. And he was almost ostentatiously clean: scrubbed pink and close-shaved – too close indeed, for a piece of cotton-wool clung to his chin where he had cut himself.

The taxi rounded the corner by South Kensington tube station, pausing at a zebra crossing for two sandwich-men.

‘Look at those poor silly bleeders,’ said the taxi-driver. ‘Breaks your heart, doesn’t it?’

The sandwich-men were religious, not mercantile. ‘Despair, Despair’, read one of the boards, and ‘There Shall Be A Wailing’.

‘Good God,’ said Cook. ‘Wait a minute, will you?’

He got out of the cab and trotted after the sandwich-men.

‘Hi, want to talk to you.’

'Not breakin' any laws. Not beggin'. Don't want your money -'

'You're the chaps they got at Ascot.'

'Lumme, you're the bloke undid us. I pray that the Lord of Hosts has visited His vengeance on the uncircumcised -'

'Oh, so do I,' said Cook. 'So do I.'

'Wouldn't half like to take a crack at vose Charlies me-self.'

'Know what I wanted to ask you,' said Cook. 'Can you tell me anything about the fellows who jumped you?'

'They stole upon the servants of the Lord, going basely upon their bellies.'

'Did you get a look at them?'

'Not a glimpse, Jack. Tell you what, vough - vey had a ripe old pong.'

'Smell?'

'Garlic, I reckon. Vey was dagoes, likely -'

'Venezuelans?'

'Some kind of wops. Midianites and servants of Baal.'

'Ha,' said Cook. 'Very interesting. Most grateful.'

'All right, cocky, all ver best.'

The sandwich-boards teetered away down Sidney Place. Cook got back into his taxi.

'Friends of yours?' said the driver.

'Colleagues,' said Cook.

The Air Terminal was bedlam.

A girl with only a third of her face unconcealed by dirty fair hair stood at the bottom of the staircase.

'Just one more, dear,' bayed a ring of hungry photographers. 'Smile, dear.'

The girl fiddled with the collar of her mackintosh and scowled with mechanical ferocity.

'Will you get married in Ireland, dear?'

'Ooh, I think so, really, yes.'

'Dad going to give his consent?'

'Ooh, I don't think so, really, no.'

She climbed one step towards the restaurant and turned again to the flashbulbs.

'Will you comment on reports that your father is taking steps to have you made a ward of court?'

The girl turned, baffled, to her companion: a young man in a dark suit with expensive shoes and a boil on his neck.

'No comment,' he said.

The girl climbed one more step. Cook tried to reach the bottom one, swinging his suitcase against the legs of the cordoning reporters.

'Will there be a reconciliation?'

'Ooh, I shouldn't think so, really, no.'

At London Airport Cook looked anxiously round for policemen. They might be in plain clothes: detectives. Dotting the waiting-rooms and thronging the corridors there were, Cook saw with horror, hundreds of men in plain clothes. He assumed an elaborate nonchalance, humming 'If I was the only boy in the world' and jingling the change in his pockets.

Then, on a later bus than his, the eloping couple arrived. The men with cameras and the men with note-books still circled and eddied round them. Camouflage, thought Cook, and thrust into the crowd.

'Will you confirm a rumour - ' began a reporter.

'Yes,' cried Cook, 'I want to know if you'll confirm a rumour - '

His flight was called on the loudspeaker, so he elbowed out of the group and went to the departure lounge. Alone again he felt frightened and unprotected.

Jill, the healthy air hostess on the Viscount for Milan, stood at the top of the gangway welcoming her passengers aboard the aircraft.

Some tourists from the Midlands - they'd be all right, buy a lot of Players for their holiday. An Italian family - they'd be no trouble but they might not like the lunch much. Some Americans - good, they were usually good sports and joky. Then a very tall old man.

'Mind your head, please,' she intoned automatically.

The old man behaved rather oddly. He stopped at the top of the gangway, looked nervously out over the tarmac, ducked hurriedly in through the door, looked round again, and shot into a seat. Then he covered his face up completely with the *Daily Mail*: asleep, you'd think, only Jill could see him peering over the top of it sometimes. It was just as though he was running away and hiding.

But when they were airborne the old man seemed to relax. He ate up all his lunch, which no one ever did, and then drank the most awful quantities of brandy. By the end he was quite enjoying himself. Jill was pleased he got over his nervousness so nicely, but a bit shocked at the way he did it.

The train from Milan got to Turin soon after five. It was terrifically hot. Cook, with a purple, throbbing face, carried his bag along a line of taxis, looking for a driver who spoke English.

'Yes, sir; yes, sir, I speak.'

In a few seconds they were weaving and blaring among the buses and bicycles. By a quarter-past six they were at San Ruggiero: a massive locked gate, a lodge like a blockhouse, and a high iron fence crossing the countryside in both directions.

There was a blue door in the blockhouse beside the main gate. Cook banged on this. After a very long time a small tough man appeared. He had a wrinkled, blackish face and neat striped trousers; he looked at Cook and the driver with open hostility.

'Tell him,' said Cook to the driver, speaking loudly and with a slight foreign accent, 'I have come to visit the Principessa.'

There was a long and furious exchange between driver and gatekeeper.

'This man says,' said the driver at last, 'you may not go in.'

'But I have come to buy a horse from the Principessa.'

There was another long argument. The driver cajoled and

then shouted with anger. The gatekeeper was sullen, but his short, chopping gestures were savage and unambiguous.

'This man says there are no horses here.'

Presently Cook and the driver got back into the taxi and drove off: there was nothing else to do. The gatekeeper stood watching them go. The driver leaned out of his window and shouted at him until they were far out of ear-shot.

'Telephone,' said Cook. 'Take me to a telephone.'

'O.K.'

The driver turned off the main road and they bumped to a village with grey houses and dirty black cobbles. There was a traffic-light in the middle, hung high over the street between the houses, which blinked a yellow bulb continuously on and off; below this, on the gritty corner, there was a small bar with an immense Gaggia Espresso machine. Sitting outside, staring at nothing, there were some old men with leathery faces and rough grey clothes. Inside, drinking coffee and talking about football, there were plump youths with tight stripy suits and pointed shoes and great shining waves of carefully arranged hair.

There was a telephone in the corner, just below the television which would soon be switched on for the whole village to watch. Silence fell in the bar and everyone listened as the driver, quite quickly, got through to San Ruggiero.

'C'è un signore Inglese - un lord inglese, capisce?'

There was a pause. Then the driver beckoned Cook.

'Hullo?'

The youths leant forward. One took out a comb and adjusted the glistening black sausage-curls over his ears. One dusted his shoes with a puce nylon handkerchief.

'Hullo? Princess?'

'Who the hell's that?' said a rich Scotch baritone.

'My name is Jansen. Ha - Mr O'Mahoney, the blood-stock agent in London, suggested I should get in touch with you -'

'The young puppy.'

'I come from Johannesburg -'

'Well, what about it? I come from Aberdeen.'

'I want to buy some horses - '

He explained, against a stiff barrage of disbelief and rudeness, that he was very rich indeed: that he knew nothing about horses but wanted to buy some for racing.

'So it was you came banging on my door just now.'

'Yes. Your lodge-keeper didn't seem to - '

'He has orders. Well, Mr Jansen, perhaps we can do business.'

'You'll have to advise me,' said Cook, sounding as silly as he could. 'Really know nothing about race-horses - '

'Och, put yourself in my hands.'

'Thank you *very* much. You'll be able to quote me prices too, I expect? I have very little idea - '

'Certainly, I'll tell you what the animals cost. I'll maybe have one or two will suit you very well, Mr Jansen. Now where are you staying?'

'I'll find a hotel - '

'What nonsense. You'll stay here with me. If you're going to buy my horses,' she laughed richly, 'I want you under my eye.'

'Most awfully kind of you - '

'I have a great house here and no one in it. And in the morning we'll look at the horses. It would be yearlings you're wanting?'

'Those are the babies, are they?'

'Ay,' said the Princess, 'those are the babies.'

'Splendid,' said Cook, 'splendid. I'll be with you in twenty minutes.'

'You'll not find me in, for I must talk to my trainer. But I'll see you at dinner, Mr Jansen. I always change, though God knows why.'

'Really most grateful - '

'It's a pleasure.'

Cook paid for his call and nodded affably round the bar and they drove back to San Ruggiero.

It was a flattish, wooded countryside: not unlike East Anglia, but neater and drier. Every few yards along the main road there were bright little hoardings for petrol and

aperitifs and detergents. There were very few cars, but several enormous lorries with trailers, and a bus with a wild continuous two-note horn like a yodel. The low evening sun was still hot and brilliant.

The gatekeeper was waiting for them. As they stopped he shouted something in a less hostile voice and then picked up a telephone, watching them through the open blue door. Presently he put the telephone down and unlocked the gate. As the car rolled through he peered at Cook with a frank and grinning interest. Cook smiled back.

'Cretino,' muttered the driver, accelerating up the drive.

Inside it was another world, familiar to Cook from his remote youth. Banks of laurels, stiff and shiny under a layer of dust, bordered a well-swept drive; Cook remembered just such another grimly respectable drive: it had led to a large private hotel outside Bournemouth at which he had stayed, at the turn of the century, with an elderly aunt.

They crunched round the final corner, where a group of cypresses tidily marked the end of the laurels, and came to the house across a sweep of gravel. It matched the drive: it was the twin of the Bournemouth hotel (Balmoral Lodge, Cook remembered with a start, a place of grief). Like the hotel, San Ruggiero had a ponderous front of dark stone, jutting turrets, a battlemented tower, and stained glass in the downstairs windows; like the hotel it filled Cook with discomfort and foreboding.

The front door opened and a big, solemn man in livery came down the steps. His uniform was blue, high at the neck, with little gold epaulettes and crested brass buttons like a hunting-coat. Cook choked at the sight of him, and realized he had come to the centre of the plot. This was indeed an evil and frightening place, and it was the end of his quest. For the solemn man in livery was completely bald. He had a domed yellow head and little black eyes. He was the man who had kidnapped the Irishman at Ascot.

He said something to Cook rapidly but respectfully. Cook turned helplessly to the driver.

'This man says the Signora Principessa is out. But he will show you to your room.'

'Thank you.'

'Il signore dice grazie.'

'Prego, signore.'

Cook paid the driver and the car started with a jerk, skidded round and roared down the drive. Before it had vanished an old man appeared round the corner of the house and began to sweep the gravel smooth with a besom.

The butler led the way into the house. The hall was huge and dark: curtains were drawn half-across the stained-glass windows. On the walls there were animal-heads, tusks, and arrangements of swords and spears. High-backed chairs of intricately-carved black wood lined the walls. All over the floor, dotted among tiger-skins, there were small inlaid tables with potpourri bowls and patch-boxes and photographs in silver frames.

They threaded this nightmare maze, then climbed marble stairs to a long corridor. Cook was shown to his room. He learned, after much amiable miming, that the Princess's room was opposite and a bathroom next door. The butler drew back the curtains and Cook went over to the window and looked out. A hundred yards away he saw two neat stable-blocks, facing each other, with bright red roofs. Each was in the form of a 'U' round a concrete yard. They looked, at this distance, tidy and well kept and rather empty.

'Horses?' said Cook, jogging up and down and wagging his fists.

'Sì sì,' said the butler happily, *'i cavalli, sì!'*

'Not the stud is it, there? *Ha - bambi-i?* There? Eh?'

'Ah no, signore, là -' The butler pointed farther to the left, towards a low hill beyond a wood. Cook had a glimpse of more stables, paddocks, and a row of pink cottages.

The butler began to unpack, laying out Cook's dinner-jacket on the purple bed. Cook stared at the training-stable:

Yellow Silk. There'd be a card saying Larksong. Have a good look tomorrow. Ha! thought Cook in triumph, ha, ha!

The butler bowed himself out (murderous brute, thought

Cook smiling and nodding and talking rapidly. His footsteps squeaked away and thumped down the marble stairs. There was a great silence. •

Cook began to empty his pockets on to the dressing-table. Money; watch; little torch, with two new batteries, working beautifully again. He took off his coat and padded about the room. Allegorical scenes in heavy gilt frames; a religious aquatint; a needlework picture of a peasant child with a sheep.

He went to the door and looked up and down the corridor. No one about. Dead silence.

He was very frightened, but this was too good a chance to be missed.

He crept across the corridor and turned the marble handle of the Princess's door. Silence. He opened the door a little and peered in. Silence. He edged inside and shut the door behind him. It clicked with a noise like a pistol-shot: he froze, thinking of excuses for when they found him. But no one came. The silence was absolute.

His ears stopped thudding and he looked round the room. It was small and light; the evening sun blazed horizontally through the wide-open windows, gilding the old high bed and the crowded pictures and the heavy, excessive furniture. Ranged along the mantel there were dozens of small china horses. On a little rosewood desk there were piles of letters and books, photographs in frames, and more horses; on top of a bookcase more photographs, still more horses, and a hairless woolly dog with one button eye.

Cook tiptoed about, looking for clues.

This place was the heart of the mystery, yes. Skulduggery here, absolutely. That butler, dressed up like a page boy and grinning and jabbering – had they buried the poor little Irishman here, or rolled him in a ditch in England before they came back?

The photographs showed stiff young men in bowler hats and high white collars, children in sailor-suits sitting in pony-carts, girls with tiny waists and huge round busts covered in lace and pendants, and horses being led in,

through cheering crowds, after winning long-ago races. Damned odd clothes we all wore then, thought Cook. Try the bookcase lot.

He was half-way to the other side of the room when footsteps approached, shuffling, along the corridor.

They conked the little Irishman – what will they do to me? Say I came in here by mistake – thought it was the bathroom – strange house, got lost –

The footsteps stopped outside the door. Cook looked frantically round for somewhere to hide. Under the bed! He took a quick, quiet step towards it and the floor creaked appallingly. He froze, one foot in front of the other, paralysed with fright. The footsteps moved on and shuffled out of earshot. Cook made a tiny, whimpering noise and turned to the bookcase.

In the middle, in a dappled wooden frame, there was a photograph of a tall magnificent girl in a sequined dress. An ostrich feather fan dangled from one hand; the other rested on a short marble pillar. Behind was an urn of flowers against heavy draperies. Slanted across the bottom right-hand corner a bold inscription was written: 'Mario from his little Moselle – always.'

Moselle! The Princess, of course. She was Moselle! And this Mario was the young chap's father. Ha ha! thought Cook, ha ha ha!

He tiptoed to the door and opened it softly. The dark corridor was empty. He crossed to his own room and went in breezily: and came face to face with the butler.

'Just stretching the old legs,' said Cook, grinning foolishly.

The butler nodded and smiled and finished turning back the bed. Then he bowed again, said something polite, and went out.

Cook sat on the bed, letting himself recover slowly. Well, it was all right. Got away with it. Ha, he thought, spirits returning, got away with it again, yes, of course!

Now the Princess was once upon a time Moselle. Who was Hock? The elder Mario Montevarese? What about Cork-screw? And grudge? His? Hers? Someone's against one of

them? What had this got to do with Yellow Silk and Lark-song?

He went downstairs in his rusty old dinner-jacket feeling on the edge of the final discoveries.

Dinner was delightful.

The Princess, splendid in full-length crimson velvet, received him in a cheerful drawing-room. He drank a glass of excellent sherry and told her haphazard lies about Johannesburg. When they went in to dinner in the great black dining-room he gave her his arm and she smiled graciously. Over the first course (eggs in pastry: delicious, Cook thought) she promised to show him all round the stud in the morning.

'Can I see the horses in training too?'

'Certainly, why not?'

'Haven't you got a good one – ha, let's think of the name – one they say is the best two-year-old in Europe?'

'That will be Larksong they mean.'

'Can I see her?'

'I'm afraid she won't be at home, Mr Jansen. She's off to the government vet first thing in the morning – she has to be inspected for various bloody things before she goes off to Paris for a big race the week after next. And she's not for sale, I must tell you. I sold her to an American lady – och, three months back.'

'I was told she was *very* good –'

'You were told the truth. I'd like to have kept her myself – raced her and then put her to stud here. There's no so many mares of her quality around. However, I had to sell the lass –'

'Will she win in France?'

'There's others they say are good.'

'Are you backing her?'

'I'm not a betting woman, Mr Jansen.'

'No? You look like one.'

'Now,' she laughed, 'that I think is rude.'

'No no,' said Cook. 'Meant to be polite.'

'Well, I used to gamble once. There were lads in shiny hats used to collect us at the stage door, and off we'd go in cabs to the gaming-parties - '

'Stage door?'

'You'll maybe have heard of the Gaiety, Mr Jansen, even down there in the gold-fields.'

'Some kind of - ha - music-hall?'

The Princess laughed, her red hair bobbing and her great diamond ear-rings dancing in the candle-light. 'Ay, some kind of music-hall.'

'You were the star, of course!'

'Indeed I was not. There was two of us did a little turn - just a curtain-raiser, but the boys always said they liked it - ' She broke into song, her rough baritone giving way to a surprisingly sweet little contralto:

*'We're just little water-babies, two little water-babies,
Maidens from the Rhine - '*

'Bravo,' said Cook.

'The Rhinemaidens we called ourselves. So the stage door Johnnies called us Hock and Moselle . . . Well, that's a long time ago.'

'Hock and Moselle - '

'I was Moselle. They said I was the lighter one of us two - imagine the impertinence of those lads - and the other lassie was Hock, for she had the fuller body, they said. Ah, we had a lot of cheek to put up with but we had a lot of fine times too - '

'What became of Hock?'

'She married an American and went over there to New York. We lost touch, you know. Well, it's forty years - more! Myself, I married an Italian, of course, and came out here. His family were not pleased, Mr Jansen, they were not! Even my son is dead ashamed of his mother - they're terrible snobs, these people. He won't even drink a German wine - won't have the names mentioned, if you'll believe it. Well, I've been a stable lass here for forty years - a long way from the Gaiety Theatre, Mr Jansen.'

She reminisced, happily slanderous, about those roaring prosperous days: boating parties, picnic parties, parties for the races and parties at the Café Royal: young men, old men, dukes, adventurers, Jews, Americans: and always the two of them, Hock and Moselle to their shifting unconventional set, sharing diggings, hunting in pairs, inseparable.

Cook could see, in this old grotesque with the bright dyed hair, the remnants of the 'Rhinemaiden' of so long ago. The soft round chin of the photograph upstairs had sagged into yellowing jowls; the fine eyes had pouches, now, greyly above and below; the hands were freckled and not absolutely clean; but you could see she had once had beauty and still had spirit and will. . . . Will, thought Cook, watching the broad low forehead and the wide mouth: utter damned ruthlessness. A monster! That little Irishman probably worked for her faithfully for thirty years. Where was he now - what was left of him? She sat in the middle of this horrible great house like a beastly fat spider in a web: and all the flies on the fringes - the people she'd dragged into her racket - the Curtises, Robin DeFoe, her own son. . . . Well, how did they all fit in? And what, in God's name, was the point of the thing? Absolutely mad. Meanwhile the important thing was to look at this animal they called Larksong. No go tomorrow. Have to be tonight. Oh God, thought Cook, I wish I didn't want money so badly.

' . . . at the Ritz where they were living,' the Princess was saying. 'A girl called Mabel Mandeville tried to swing on a chandelier and of course the bloody thing broke - '

'Splendid,' said Cook, 'magnificent.'

'Well, Mr Jansen, I don't know about you, but I'm an old woman and I'm for my bed.'

'Absolutely, time to turn in.'

They turned in.

Cook changed into rubber-soled shoes, put his little torch in his pocket, and sat in a chair to wait. Eleven-thirty now. Leave it till one. Stay awake. Think about a house.

He thought about his ideal house, planning each room, disposing the furniture, picturing the elevation and the

gardens and the park. At least three bathrooms: one for guests, one for servants, one for himself. His would have an open coal fire, a thick carpet, a cane armchair, a book-case with Hazlitt and Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and Joshua Slocum's round-the-world thing. . . .

And he could do it! He'd won! One more minor check-up, then ring up the bookie and there we are. One little job – tonight's little exercise. Nothing to it. Downstairs, short walk, find the horse, have a peep, trot back into bye-byes and all complete.

Time? Nearly time. Stay awake. The breakfast-room, now. Very nice to have a little east room with the morning sun, bright curtains, possibly a dresser with some nice gay china. . . . And reading-stands, why not? You had them at a club, why not have them at home? Big ones, for a morning paper. Guests appreciate that. So would he. Have them made – afford that kind of thing now.

Time? Time.

Cook felt, for a moment, sick with fright. He thought of the heavy foreign darkness. He thought of the Irishman, limp and silent in a ditch. Then he thought of his sunny breakfast-room (honey in a pot like a bee-hive, great big coffee-cups, kedgerec on the hot-plate, cold ham on the sideboard) and he got up and went to the door and softly out on to the landing.

THE first disaster was in the hall. His elbow, in the thick darkness, brushed a photograph-frame from a little table. He lunged to catch it, and upset the table. Table and photograph-frame fell on to an animal-skin, but several small, fragile objects bounced on to the marble floor and exploded like grenades.

Cook crouched stiffly down with a tiny hope of somehow hiding when they turned on the lights and came for him. No one came. After a long time he struggled to his feet and crunched softly through broken china to the front door. This, he saw with his little torch, was many times bolted and elaborately locked. But everything was in good condition – oiled, shiny, silent. He got out and went down the steps to the gravel.

The gravel was terrible. Whenever he put a foot down, however lightly, there was a loud prolonged noise like a wave sucking at the stones on a shingly beach. He tried tip-toeing, but his toes made sharper crunches, and he was afraid of falling over. He tried going on all fours, but the gravel hurt his hands. Desperate, he ran a few paces: but the noise was so dreadful that he stopped, skidding dryly and nearly tripping. The front of the house seemed endless. When at last he reached the steep grass bank at the corner he sat down, nearly in tears, waiting for the shouts and the running feet and the lanterns.

Presently it became clear that no one was coming. Got away with it again. Miracle. Deep sleepers. On, on, on.

The night was very black and absolutely still. Foreign insects buzzed and clicked in the dusty bushes. A long way away a dog barked, sounding English and familiar. Cook was heartened, and stood up and switched on his torch for a moment.

The gravel ran along the side of the house, bordered on the inside by a row of stones. Between the stones and the house there was a narrow flower-bed, ridiculously neat. On the other side of the path a bank slanted steeply to a demure jungle of heavy-leaved bushes.

Cook switched off his torch and wondered what to do. He could go along in the flower-bed: but then he would leave a deep trail of prints, going and coming, which would make them suspicious in the morning. Besides, there was something revolting about ploughing through a tidy, well-raked flower-bed – something uncouth and squalid. Perhaps he could go along the line of stones, balancing. He turned on his torch again, looking at the stones. They stuck up jaggedly. No no, not the stones. The path? Gravel. All right, the bank. By going sideways, on all fours, he might get along it without sliding off.

He tried this and it seemed to work. He felt outwards, along the bank, with his right foot. A slight imperfection in its smoothness gave him a foothold. He shifted his weight very slowly, sliding his hands along and clutching little tufts of the short, coarse grass. He found a place for his left foot and shifted his weight back to it and then felt onwards again with his right. Yes, working.

He sidled along the bank, clutching and cautious and fairly quiet, for a very long time. Presently he came to a good double foothold and stopped to rest. Must be nearly there. He switched on his torch to see how far he had to go. The bank and the path and the wall of the house stretched away, far beyond the beam of the torch. God. He looked behind. There was the beginning of the bank, where he had started. He had come seven feet. Still be climbing along here this time tomorrow. Very well, bank impossible. Gravel? Stones? Flower-bed? He pondered miserably, the sweat drying coldly on his face.

Gravel harder here, perhaps. He put down a foot, gingerly. It sank into the little round stones with a small, gritty roar. Not harder.

Stones on the edge of the flower-bed less pointed here?

He blinked his torch at them. They stuck up like a row of teeth.

Flower-bed then. He lowered himself on to the path and crunched across it, and then stepped unhappily into the earth. They must have watered it heavily in the evening: his feet sank immediately to the top of his shoes. When he pulled out his right foot there was a sucking noise like the last of the water leaving an old-fashioned bath. The effort forced his left foot deeper into the mud, and when he pulled it out he left his shoe behind. His foot, suddenly released by the shoe, flew further up than he meant. His right foot was now clamped deeply in the sticky blackness: he fell, helplessly and heavily. He seemed at once to sink inches into inky treacle. Small, brittle plants crumpled dryly under him like old newspaper. The wet earth soaked instantly through his trousers, making his behind clammy and wretched. He put his palms on the ground and tried to push himself up again. The earth felt like porridge, forcing itself stickily between his fingers. He levered himself up and got to his knees, pulling his hands free. He could feel the mud glued to his fingers and wrists and shirt-cuffs. He remembered his left shoe and presently, groping in the earth, located it. He pulled it out and threw it on to the wholesome safety of the gravel. The effort forced his knees down into the bed and he felt his legs becoming wet. He leaned forward and grasped two of the jagged stones bordering the bed, and hauled himself out of the earth and on to the path.

Dry land. Thank God, thought Cook, oh thank God.

The gravel rattled and thundered. Little sharp flints pushed ruthlessly at his wet left foot through the silk sock. He crouched shakily and began feeling round for his shoe. He swept his hands to and fro, quartering the path. No shoe. He pushed one muddy hand into his pocket and found his torch and switched it on and flicked the beam backwards and forwards over the gravel. No shoe. He tried to put all his weight on his right foot, but he began to stagger and he had to put his left foot down hard, hurting it terribly. No shoe no shoe no shoe.

Thousands of miles from home, in an enemy country, surrounded by vicious criminals. Stranded in a desert of hideous gravel, unable to move without lacerating a foot. Cold wet bum, clammy legs, filthy mud all over the dinner-jacket. It was a long time since Cook had cried, but he cried now.

Presently he sniffed and felt better. He tied his handkerchief round his left foot and nerved himself to face the gravel. Perhaps no bedrooms this side. If they weren't woken up by now they never would be. Come so far, must go on. He set off more bravely, limping, and came to the corner of the house. Here the bank flattened and there was a grass verge to walk on: quiet, blessedly soft. His torch revealed a low stone wall and he realized he had reached the area he could see from his bedroom window. He walked faster, confidence once again flaring. Soon he was on the concrete yard of the nearer stable-block. He padded along the row of doors and almost at once found Larksong. Another well-oiled bolt. He slipped in, making small comforting noises. The horse in the light of his torch looked at him sleepily, quite unalarmed, and stretched out a long soft muzzle for a treat. He stroked her nose, she mouthed at his sleeve, and they seemed friends.

He knelt down. 'Clever girl, clever Yellow Silk, let's have a look - just a - quick little - '

The blaze of light and the hand on his shoulder came at the same moment. The horse backed away, tossing her head and rolling her eyes. Cook, very slowly, turned round.

It was the butler. He was still in his livery, with the collar undone. The overhead light shone on his bald yellow head. He had a large black automatic pistol in his right hand. His left gripped Cook's shoulder, squeezing painfully. Behind, standing silently, were three more men - the gatekeeper in his striped trousers, a big man in a blue boiler-suit, and a fat young man with a red tweed cap. All four stared at Cook with blank, cruel faces.

'*Avanti,*' said the butler finally, gesturing with the gun.

'Well, Major Cook,' said the Princess, 'this is a fine return for my hospitality.'

She was sitting in a pool of light in the great dark hall. Her pink silk dressing-gown was covered in bows and ribbons and pleats; her face, above all this girlishness, was horrifying in a mud-pack like a devil-mask; her red hair was screwed into plastic curlers. She held a small silver revolver.

Cook stood dumbly facing her. Mud caked his trousers and feet and hands. His stockinged left foot felt cold and wet on the marble. Behind him stood the butler with the black automatic, and five or six men, now, large and dark and solemn, ringed Cook from farther back in the shadows.

'You know my name,' said Cook.

'Of course we know your name. We saw you at Ascot talking to poor little Patsy McCalla. Patsy knew far too much, so we had to find out about you. What a time you've been having, Major Cook! Creeping about at Gunn's Lodge and getting yourself arrested -'

'What? Been trailing me?'

'You've been a great nuisance and a great expense, but I will say you're easy to follow. Och, it's a pity you chatted with poor wee Patsy - we had to knock him on the head because of you -'

'Murder?'

The Princess said something to one of the men in the shadows. He objected, arguing bitterly. She shouted at him, waving the little silver gun. The man nodded crossly and disappeared through a door under the stairs.

The Princess turned back to Cook. 'And did you find the scar you were looking for?'

'What scar?'

'It's late, Major Cook. Don't waste our time.'

'No scar on Yellow Silk. Naturally not.'

'Well, that's correct. So now there's six of us know - me, Patsy McCalla, three of my people here, and you -'

'Patsy . . . He's not dead?'

'Are you daft, Major?' The Princess said something impatiently to the men in the shadows.

'Eccoli, Altezza.'

The man who had been sent away reappeared. With him, in a flannel dressing-gown, sleepily rubbing his eyes, was the little Irishman.

'Good God,' said Cook.

'Well, sir, I'm glad to see you. You owe me a bit of money.'

'Och, Patsy, the trouble you've caused us.'

'I'm sorry, mam, I swear to God. You know I'm sorry.'

'I don't understand,' said Cook miserably.

'Tell him, Patsy.'

'Sir, I never should have run off. What kind of a return was it, I ask you, for all her ladyship's kindness, me running off and worrying them all? Thanks be to God they found me -'

'Why did you run off?'

'Ah,' the little man seemed embarrassed. 'When I say the thing out loud it sounds so horrid ungrateful -'

'Never mind, Patsy,' said the Princess. 'There's likely no great harm done.'

'Well - it was the tracks I knew - Ally Pally and Hurst and Brighton - and the bookies, you know, and the bars, and the fine fat girls - and there's no Guinness in this whole land of Italy, will you credit that, sir? And no winkles or cels or veal-and-ham pies. . . . You know I'm sorry, mam -'

'I know, Patsy.'

'In fifteen years I never had itchy feet, but all of a sudden this summer - it was being that time at Newmarket and remembering how things were. . . . Well, I'm thankful to be back to the job I know.'

'What job?' asked Cook.

'Patsy's my assistant stud groom,' said the Princess. 'I'm happy he's back, too. Now off to your bed, Patsy, for you're early in the morning I know.'

'Sure, it's half past five for me. Good night, sir. Good night, mam.'

'Good night, Patsy.'

'Good night,' said Cook.

The little man padded away in his slippers and disappeared under the stairs.

'Now, Major Cook,' said the Princess, frowning. 'Just what is all this fun you've been having?'

'You know,' said Cook bitterly.

'Ay, likely I do. You complicate things, Major. It's a terribly pity.'

'Why?' asked Cook suddenly.

'Why do you complicate things?'

'Why did you do it? What's the point of it? What in God's name is the point of it?'

'That's a good question. Why is Larksong at Lambourn and this silly wee Yellow Silk here?'

'Yes, yes, why?'

'The dear God knows. Patsy was away in his London pubs, I had a new stud-groom and several new lads in the training-stable – the fillies got mixed, that's all. I gave Yellow Silk to my son, you see? and he took her to England, like I thought he would, to be trained by his sweetie's brother. They ran her at Ascot, and then we realized –'

'Not before then?'

'How should we? They're like as two pins. Patsy would have known, because of that wee scar he says Larksong has. . . . Well, I was in a difficult position, you understand. In the first place, here's this useless filly we have to call Larksong. I was paid the earth for her by yon American – I can't own up now and say sorry, you bought a dud –'

'Give the money back?'

'No, I can't do that either. D'you think I'd have sold her if I didn't need the silver? Then again, if they find Larksong ran at Ascot calling herself Yellow Silk – why, they'll never let her run again anywhere. And then again there's Mario and his trainer-boy. They ran what they call a ringer, you see, at Ascot. They didn't know they were doing it, but that won't help them. They'd be warned off the turf and I don't

know what. *My son, his father's son*, warned off the turf – no, Major, we cannot have that.'

'No no,' said Cook, 'see your point.'

'So we have a bit secret to keep. And the question that disturbs me, Major, is what are we going to do about you?'

There was a silence. Then the butler coughed like a large flesh-eating animal. Cook started and looked round. The butler shifted his gun to his left hand and drew the forefinger of his right slowly across his neck. The Princess said something softly in Italian. The butler nodded. The men in the shadows all stepped one or two paces towards Cook. The plump young man in the red tweed cap took a switch-knife out of his pocket and snapped the blade out of the hilt.

'You can't do this,' said Cook.

'Why not, Major?'

'People know I'm here.'

'I think not.'

'Lots of people. Important people.'

'No, Major.'

'Well, that taxi-driver –'

'Och, we know poor Giulio.'

'Got friends, damn it –'

'A long way away.'

'I'm an old man. Can't do this to an old man.'

'Why not? It's all the easier.'

'All wet,' whimpered Cook. 'Only got one shoe –'

The Princess said something to the men. The gatekeeper stepped forward and handed Cook his left shoe.

'Can I put it on?'

'You'll no be needing to walk.'

'I want to put it on.'

The Princess said he could. He squatted down and tried to push his foot into the shoe. The shoe was sodden and limp, coated with mud inside and out. He struggled, panting, and finally forced it on. It squelched wetly when he stood up, but he felt his manhood return.

'Damned butchery,' he shouted. 'I won't have it!'

'No?'

'Look,' he said, suddenly intelligent, 'point is this. Our interests coincide.'

'Major, Major, you're hawering.'

'No no no, listen. You got to keep this switch secret, right? Otherwise you got to pay back a lot of money, lose the use of the horse, put your son and Jack Curtis in the cart, right?'

'Very fair statement of my difficulty, Major.'

'I want to keep the thing secret too! Don't you see? Identical interest! Don't you see? Allies!'

'Why?'

'Oh, for God's sake, woman - I back Toffee-Apple in the Charles de Gaulle. Larksong stays favourite, I get a nice price - threes I can get. Then your Yellow Silk runs, hasn't got a hope, Toffee-Apple wins -'

'Gracious,' said the Princess, suddenly laughing, 'so *that's* what you're after!'

'Of course, what else?'

The Princess laughed and laughed, waving her silver pistol and tossing her plastic curlers. Cook began to laugh too, hysterical with relief. The butler, behind, began to choke and gurgle; he slapped Cook on the shoulder, wagged his gun, and then stamped round in circles on the marble floor, roaring with mirth. The men in the shadows pointed at Cook and slapped their thighs, not understanding but bellowing and sobbing just the same.

'I thought,' said the Princess finally, 'I thought you were trying to expose the fraud - nail the criminal -'

'Good God, no! Why would I do that? Just the opposite.'

'Why indeed? Well, Major, that's grand - that makes a bit sense. Let's have some lights and a wee drink to celebrate.'

Soon they were in the drawing-room, cosily drinking grappa. Cook had changed into dry clothes, but the Princess was still in her billowing pink and her mud-pack and curlers and little satin mules.

'So what will you do, Major, now you're certain? Put the whole thing on Toffee-Apple when you get back?'

'That's it. Eleven thousand at three to one.'

'Just ring up the bookies? Easy as that?'

'Absolutely. They'll think I'm mad.'

'This Mrs What's-her-name,' said the Princess slowly, 'that bought my Larksong -'

'Miss DeFoe.'

'Ay, that was the name. She'll be the glum one, Major, wouldn't you say?'

'Damned glum.'

'And she will have had a lot of money on the race, no doubt. Well, she can afford it, they tell me. Now this Mr Lough, who owns Toffee-Apple -'

'Horrid little man.'

'So they tell me. He's the lucky one, Major.'

'Yes, it's a pity, rather.'

'Och, you mustn't let your feelings influence you.'

'I won't,' promised Cook. 'Good God, no.'

The Princess poured out more grappa and raised her glass.

'Well, here's to your house, Major Cook. Wisht, you'll be buying Balmoral!'

They parted affectionately in the morning. Cook was to come again, for a longer visit. The Princess promised to stay with him when he was settled into his new house. He left in her huge old Mercedes, and the plump man in the mauve cap drove him all the way to Milan. He enjoyed the flight back, drinking brandy and thinking about carpets and wall-paper.

They got into London Airport late on Saturday afternoon. Cook got his suitcase from the conveyor-belt and then hefting it wearily, decided to have a drink before he trundled back to Baker Street.

The bar was packed.

'Will you look,' said an Irishman, 'there's the heiress that's eloping.'

'Why would she be wearing a sheepskin coat and it's August?'

'Ah, Frankie, heiresses are not like you and me. Feels the cold, maybe.'

'There is no cold.'

'You're telling me that? And you're right.'

Cook barged and crashed his way to the bar. Then he sipped his brandy, on the fringes of the commotion round the heiress, thinking happily about his killing.

'You mean you *did* get married in Ireland, dear?'

'Well, in a way, really, yes.'

'By a priest, dear, do you mean?'

'Not exactly, really, no.'

'You mean you *didn't* get married in Ireland, dear?'

'By Nature, kind of,' said the girl.

'Ho ho ho,' said the reporters, 'when was *that*?'

Doncaster next week, thought Cook. Arrangements all made so I may as well go. And I'll have my bet – my big bet – my last bet.

'What's your Mum going to say about *that*, dear?'

'Ooh, you mustn't tell her.'

'Hear that? We mustn't tell Mum –'

Three days till Doncaster, thought Cook. What I'll do is I'll sit my exams for my St Hildreth's diploma. Then when I buy my farm I'm qualified. Start off right. Best foot forward.

'What about Scotland, dear? Thought about Gretna, have you?'

'It's got a bit common, really, hasn't it?'

'Got a bit common. Hear that?'

There are still a lot of things, thought Cook, I don't understand. We know about the scar and the nail. We've got the pig-man. Hock and Moselle we know about, but where does Hock fit into the switch? And what about the grudge? And what about Corkscrew?

Never mind, thought Cook comfortably. Never – mind.

HE spent Sunday revising. Grain-crops, root-crops, feed-crops, vegetables. Beef-herds, dairy-herds, pigs, sheep, poultry. Buildings and drainage. Fertilizers, insecticides, weed-killers. He was very tired when he shut his books, but he thought he had a chance of passing.

On Monday, from three till six, he sat his final papers. He took all the relevant books out of his sitting-room and put them in a pile in the passage, so as not to be tempted to cheat. Then he locked his door and took the telephone off the hook. He smoked a cigarette, feeling as he had felt, forty-five years ago, before going over the top in the Flanders mud. (He knew, obscurely, that he should not smoke while he was doing his examination.) At exactly three o'clock he sat down at his writing-table and broke the seals of the papers. He spread them flat, with slightly trembling hands, and started Question One.

Sharp at six, though he had not quite finished, he put down his pen and leant back and flexed his exhausted fingers. Then he folded up his papers (his drawings of an ideal cow-house, his essay about eliminating couch-grass) and put them in an envelope and addressed it to the Dean of Studies.

Later he went to Blazon's and had a bottle of champagne with his dinner.

At midday on Tuesday he caught a train to Doncaster.

Cook had the Doncaster meeting nicely under control. He stayed, as he had for years, at a pub ten miles from the course. He was driven to and fro, as always, by the proprietor of a garage in the village: a pound a day, plus the petrol and the car-park ticket. His tips, year after year, were eagerly followed by the publican, pot-boy,

garage-man, garage-mechanic, and other familiars of his visits. This year he angered them all by not having any tips.

'Not betting,' he told the garage-man on his way to the course on Wednesday.

'Come into a million, Major?'

'No no, Ron, nothing like that.'

'Nuisance,' said Ron crossly. 'We needed a bit of brass just now.'

'Well,' said Cook, 'put my fare up. Everything's going up. Got to keep pace with inflation.'

'A pound's the price,' said Ron sourly.

The old breakdown van was overtaken by a schoolgirl on a bicycle. Ron pressed his horn. 'Speeding,' he shouted. 'Bloody road-hog.'

They rattled through a village defaced by a huge new petrol station.

'Changes,' said Cook.

'Eh, the country-side's gone daft. There's an American lady that's taken a house for the races, and she's demented. No doubt of it.'

'Miss DeFoe?'

'Very likely. I've never seen such a madhouse. It's not what people round here are used to, Major.'

'I believe you,' said Cook. 'Big house?'

'Pretty big. Borthwick Hall. What they call a prep-school.'

'Good God.'

'I was over shifting for them when caterer moved in. She's mad - must be. Eighty bedrooms - bloody great dormitories -'

'What about the boys?'

'Chicken-pox. Headmaster wrote to parents. They don't come back till party's over.'

'Another party,' said Cook thoughtfully. 'I might go. Rather lucky, the boys not coming back because of chicken-pox.'

'Lucky? No more chicken-pox than you. Americans

offered that much money, he sat up all night writing the letters.'

'Gets things done, Miss DeFoe.'

'Reckon so. Moving in some bloody strange beasts, they were, Sunday. Half a bloody zoo.'

'Good God.'

'All for this party Saturday night.'

'Animals invited? What? Lions and things?'

'Seems so,' said Ron gloomily. He trod on his accelerator, clamping it to the floor. The breakdown van began to grind and roar and shudder and very slowly overtook a wagon with a horse.

'I believe I'll go,' said Cook. 'I enjoyed the last one. I want you to take me.'

'Eh, Major, you've changed. No tips, no bets, off to parties.'

'Getting old,' said Cook. 'Rather like a party.'

'That'll be a fiver, then. Parties! Not right, at your age.'

'Well, Major,' said Lauric Love, 'missed you at Hurst Park, sir.'

'Did you? Yes, daresay you did.'

'And Windsor, sir. Missed you there, Major.'

'Daresay you did, yes.'

'Well, sir, what's your fancy in this one?'

'Not betting.'

'Very likely right, sir. Tricky race.'

'Not betting at all.'

'The whole *meeting*, Major?'

'The whole meeting. I'm just watching. Very pretty sight.'

'And your winnings, sir?'

'Ha, them. How much?'

'Major Cook's credit, George?'

'Thirteen thousand three hundred and fifty-six pounds, three shillings and tenpence, Mr Love.'

'You're not going to leave that idle, sir, all these good things going in the next few days -'

'Idle? I want you to lay me one last bet.'

'This next race, sir? The Cup? The Leger?'

'The Charles de Gaulle.'

'You'll be backing Larksong, Major? Thirteen to eight, or for you we might lay seven to four.'

'Toffee-Apple.'

'Nice colt, sir. Three to one.'

'That's my bet.'

'The whole sum, sir?'

'The whole lot.'

'Then that's. . . ' Laurie worked it out in the margin of George's book. 'That's £40,068 11s. 6d. to the existing sum in credit. George, Toffee-Apple, for Major Cook.'

Cook smiled at the bookies affectionately and walked away through the crowd.

'You see, George?' said Laurie. 'Didn't I tell you?'

'What?'

'Poor old Des. Gets up a lovely bit of capital over the months, see? Then goes and blues it on a silly.'

'Toffee? Silly. at threes? Nice second favourite.'

'Second is right, George. Second is jus' exactly right.'

'Seems a shame, all that trouble.'

'Yeah,' said Laurie, 'yeah, in a way. Our Des won't never win, not finally. Not built that way.'

'Well, s'pose,' said George, 's'pose Toffee-Apple *did*.'

'I know. Des might be on to something. I mean he *can't* be, but he *might*. I wished I knew what it was reelly. We better lay some of this off. But Des won't win, George. Not finally.'

The day was fine and hot, and Cook watched race after race with detached, hazy benevolence. He saw, and avoided, Robin DeFoe, Jack and Polly Curtis, Dickinson Lough, and Celia O'Mahoney. He had cubes of ice put in his brandies and soda, and jolted home in the evening, happily drowsy, in Ron's unsilenced breakdown van. He dined on sausages and mash, which he loved, reading *Paradise Regained*. At ten o'clock he went to bed.

On Friday morning some post arrived, forwarded by his London landlady. One piece was heavy and tubular, and he slashed it open with difficulty.

It was his Diploma in Agronomy and Estate Management from St Hildreth's. He had passed. He pulled it out of its cardboard tube and unrolled it slowly on the chipped varnish of the private bar. He read it through carefully, several times. Then he did a little dance among the rickety tables with their ash-trays and beer-mats and ancient stains: but stopped, abashed, when the publican's wife came in.

In the afternoon he saw Roly Kentish in the paddock. He made Roly promise to drive him to Wiltshire the following Monday to look at a house and farm.

'Buying, Desmond?'

'Might make an offer.'

'What with? An I.O.U.? Old Tote-tickets? Pop your suits?'

'Yes,' said Cook slyly, 'suits and shoes too. A nice place, it sounds - it might suit me very well. Here - I've got a photograph -'

'You've shown it to me, Desmond.'

'Yes? You sure? Nice, it sounds.'

'I'll pick you up at eleven.'

'Fine. I might buy you lunch.'

'You really going to make this money?'

'Certainly.'

'Charles de Gaulle?'

'Of course. Thanks to your help,' said Cook politely, 'you and your nephews and so on.'

'What's your horse?'

'Ha.'

'Desmond, for God's sake, you admit I helped.'

'Oh yes, Roly. Yes, I *do*.'

'Well then.'

'Confidence. Word to a lady.'

'You won't tell me.'

'I can't tell you.'

'Then I won't take you to Wiltshire.'

'But you promised.'

'Oh all right,' said Roly crossly, 'all right, all right.'

On Saturday the St Leger was won by an outsider. Cook beamed across the sun-parched course: he thought how certainly, in any other year, he would have lost thousands on the favourite.

Heavy men with stricken faces crowded into the Members' bar. Many a bottle of champagne, ordered before the race, was drunk reluctantly and without enjoyment. Cook prodded the ice in his drink with the tip of a long, mauve finger and thought about dining-room chairs.

In the evening Cook and Ron thundered towards the party. 'Borthwick Hall, School for Boys', said a gaunt sign at the lodge gates. The breakdown van joined a queue of Bentleys in the drive, and presently Cook scrambled out near the front door.

He was wearing his old dinner-jacket: the wrong clothes. From the big quiet cars, looming up like elephants at a water-hole, came people in fantastic costumes: tigers, zebras, giraffes. A girl with long pink legs and a rump of white feathers was an ostrich. A small middle-aged man with a big stringy wife was wryly whiskered like a mouse. There were charming black cats and pink rabbits, and an old man lightly disguised as a gorilla. American, English, and a few Irish and French voices cheerfully mingled on the broad steps. Cook joined the ascending crowd: as conspicuous, in his sober dress, as a parakeet in a London tree.

They all milled upwards. By the door, one each side, stood two men in green uniforms with peaked caps. 'Zoo' said the caps. Cook tried to edge past, grinning falsely.

'Costume, sir?'

'I'm a penguin,' said Cook.

The man laughed. 'Wonder more didn't think of that. An eagle we had, and a lovely ostrich -'

'Hey, you oughta waddle,' said a woman in brilliant green scales. 'Penguins waddle. Me, I'm an iguana - I just wiggle.'

'Honey,' said a man (furred, with a long, soft tail), 'I saw you practise wiggling. I won't have you wiggling.'

'I'm an iguana. Iguanas wiggle.'

'They do not.'

'They do so.'

'It happens iguanas happen to scurry. It happens I happen to know that.'

'Sure they scurry. They scurry and wiggle.'

'Am I going to have trouble with you?' said the man in a low, bitter voice. 'Am I going to have trouble with you again tonight?'

Under cover of this Cook got clear of the man at the door and made it into a narrow outer hall. This was a bower of nightmare foliage: a tunnel of vivid green fronds. Among the branches great stuffed birds, yellow and red and electric blue, stared at the guests with bright glass eyes. Near the electric bulbs leaves were already wilting. Through gaps in the jungle brown cork notice-boards were visible, with last term's tattered lists here and there stirring in the unfamiliar warmth and wealth and scent: 2nd XI to play Douthwaite House. List of boys to see Mr Rogerson after prayers on Tuesday. Tidy-Squad to clean out the Pavilion on the last day of term. Matching these messages, faintly perceptible under the rich odours of the assembling party, there were smells of floor-polish, ink, Jeyes Fluid and misery. List of Offenders to see the Headmaster. . . .

'Ask anybody how iguanas get around. Anybody will tell you they wiggle.'

'I will not have you wiggling, hear me? I had enough of your wiggling.'

Where the entrance-hall opened into the main hall two more guards stood inspecting the guests. These were enormous Negroes in animal skins, stripes of paint, and fanciful feathered head-dresses.

'My God,' said a woman, 'look at that beautiful man.'

‘Remember where you are, baby. No dancing with the help.’

‘What I want to be told,’ said a man in a leopard-skin boiler-suit, ‘is what kind of party is this? Is it a zoo party or a jungle party?’

‘A little looseness in the thinking here.’

‘A little confusion. Not like Robin. Not *like* her.’

‘Your name, sir?’ said one of the Negroes respectfully to Cook.

Beyond him arched the great granite hall. This, redly lit, sustained the jungle motif. Massed, shiny greenery climbed the walls and festooned the distant ceiling. Creepers like monstrous bell-ropes hung among snaky trees in big green tubs. Stuffed monkeys clung to yellowish tendrils. Flowers with waxy red petals as big as plates dotted the gloom. From far away in the darkness of a corner there came, suddenly, a deep and frightening roar, cutting angrily across the buzz and hubbub of the party and causing a short, horrified silence.

‘Dear God,’ said an Englishman in badger stripes, ‘that was an old male.’

‘Old male what?’ said a frightened girl.

‘Lion.’

The hissing and chattering of monkeys answered the lion from other shadowy corners of the forest. Parrots screamed. There were the barks and grunts and wails of a dozen obscurer beasts.

‘Bloody well secured, I hope,’ said the badger-man.

‘It is quite safe, sir,’ said the magnificent Negro at the door, dipping the tall mottled feathers of his head-dress. ‘All the big cats are in very strong cages.’

‘Elephant?’ said a woman. ‘I want an elephant!’

‘The elephant is by the fives-courts, madam.’

‘Sure, where else? Someone giving it a game?’

‘Your name, sir, please,’ said the Negro to Cook again.

‘Barnum,’ said Cook. ‘Lord Barnum.’

‘Lord Barnum,’ called the Negro.

Robin DeFoe was receiving her guests under a round

straw canopy. She was dressed as a bird of prey: thousands of tawny feathers, a great hooked beak jutting from a jewelled and feathered crown, painted and glittering talons arching out at her friends as they filed past one by one.

Cook edged off to the left. He bowed to an elderly couple; they bobbed back, surprised and offended. He wondered what to do next, and whether it would be as much fun as the racing party so many months (it seemed) before.

'Hey,' came Robin's voice loudly from behind him. 'That nine-foot crocodile in the tux. Throw him out.'

Cook felt a hand on his shoulder: one of the giant Negroes. He was whisked through the crowd and out of the door and down the steps.

'Danin,' he said.

'I am sorry, sir,' said the Negro. 'Please believe there is nothing personal in this as far as I myself am concerned.'

'Yes,' said Cook. 'Yes, all right.'

The Negro bowed (wild blotched feathers sweeping through a splendid arc) and loped up the steps and into the house.

'How are my whiskers, Arthur? Arthur, I say how are my whiskers?'

'The hell. Is my tail straight? Hey? My tail? Hey?'

The big cars were still softly arriving and the bright groups still tumbling out of them and chattering across to the door.

I won't be thwarted, thought Cook furiously. Need a costume, then. Steal one? Biff someone on the head? Some woman?

'Excuse me,' said a soft voice far below.

Cook looked down. A small, old American with a mild pink face was holding a crumpled mass of dust-coloured fabric.

'Excuse me, could you help me with this, please?'

'Of course,' said Cook.

'It has me defeated. I just can't seem to get the way it goes.'

'Let's have a look.'

They unravelled it. It was a camel: a great sad head, four floppy legs like wading-trousers, a little stringy tail.

'Oh darn,' said the old American. 'Needs two.'

'Pity,' said Cook. 'No good to you.'

'Brought this all the way from New York to surprise Robin. Darn.'

'All that trouble,' said Cook. 'Sickening.'

'I couldn't,' said the gentle little man, 'I couldn't ask a favour of you, sir, could I - ?'

'Back legs? Ha, bit cramped.'

'But you have the hump. The hump will let you stand up, pretty nearly. Your head goes in the hump. It's a *big* hump.'

'Well,' said Cook, 'as you brought it all the way from New York -'

Soon they were in, zipped up and walking.

'Left right, left right,' said the American, 'hup two three four.'

Cook held his companion's waist and marched obediently. The hump was pierced so he could see and breathe, and there were slits at the side so he could poke out his hands.

'Not a bad camel,' he said. 'Well thought out.'

'This was a very expensive camel. Here are the steps, watch it. *Left* right, left right -'

The camel's lining felt cold and tacky, like old tarpaulin. It smelt of rubber. It squashed and squeaked underfoot, crepe-shod. The eye-holes in the hump shifted and wobbled. Cook was enjoying himself.

'We're in,' said the American. 'Thirsty?'

'Got to fill up the hump. Whole idea of a hump.'

'Why of course.' The American laughed mildly. 'Let's go fill up the hump with highballs.'

There was laughter and *bonhomie* all round them when whisky and soda disappeared into the camel's torso. When people asked the hump who he was Cook grunted and whinnied. They were a success.

'I forgot to say,' said the American presently, 'I have to see a little movie show.'

'Here?' said Cook. 'Now?'

'Upstairs, I guess. A young man has a movie of one of Robin's horses.'

'Enjoy that,' said Cook. 'Like a film.'

'Set? *Left* right - '

'Take a drink? What? Hump?'

'Be a raft of drinks upstairs. Kind of a party within the party.'

'Ah, fine. Lead on.'

'Hup two three four - '

Soon they were in a small, comfortable room on the first floor. Cook fiddled with his eye-holes and peered through. There was Robin in her feathers, striding up and down impatiently; a man Cook recognized as a big north-country trainer; Lord Jarrow, barking with laughter at something; and Dickinson Lough with a group of dark, plump Americans.

'There you are, Henry,' said Robin. 'Where in hell have you been?'

'Drinking,' said Cook's friend.

'Fine, drink a little more.'

'Certainly kind of you, Robin,' said Lough, 'to let me bring my friends here. I'd be proud to have you meet Miss Robin DeFoe, gentlemen - '

'Very proud,' said one.

'Great privilege,' said another.

'Like to present Mr Louis Panetti of Chicago - Louis is in real-estate - Mr Max Schneider of Cincinnati - Max is a steel man, Robin - '

'Very, very kind of you to have us come along.'

'Yeah,' said Robin. 'Where in hell is this film?'

'Ready to roll,' said a young man in a zippered sweater.

'Then somebody give me a drink and be quiet, everybody, will you?'

'Lights, please,' said the young man in the sweater.

'Thank you.'

The projector, mounted with clamps on to a lesson-scarred table, began to whirr. Everyone swivelled to face the portable screen.

'Can you see?' whispered Cook's friend.

'Fine,' said Cook. 'Perfect.'

There were flashes and zigzags on the screen, then a view across a race-course.

'Rome,' announced Robin. 'Eleventh of May this year.'

'Which is Larksong?' asked the north-country trainer.

'Right there in back.'

'White face?'

'That's her. Now watch this, boys.'

The filly at the rear of the field, once steadied, began to run. The other horses seemed suddenly to be standing still.

'My God,' said Jarrow.

'You watching, Dicky Lough?' said Robin.

'Wow,' said one of Lough's friends, craning towards the screen.

'Twenty lengths,' said Robin. 'See that, Dicky?'

The film ended and someone switched on the lights.

'Ker-rist,' said Lough's friend. 'That's a lot of horse, hey, Dicky?'

'She's a good filly,' said Lough. 'She didn't beat much there.'

'Five winners behind her,' said Robin calmly.

'Winners of what?'

'Some plenty good races, little man.'

'Hell of a performance,' said Jarrow.

'Impressive,' grumbled the northern trainer.

'Have you got anything as good as that, Barty?'

'My God, I've never *seen* anything as good as that.'

'You will do,' said Lough, 'in the Charles de Gaulle.'

'Yours?' said Robin. She crowed with unkind laughter. 'Your Candy-Bar?'

'Toffee-Apple. Yes,' said Lough, 'yes, I think he'll beat yours, Robin.'

'Horse-feathers.'

'You care to bet?'

'I certainly do care to bet.'

'Only a little bet, Robin, I suppose? A lady's bet?'

'Don't waste our drinking-time, little man. What's a Chicago bet?'

'A half - ' began Lough slowly.

'C'mon, c'mon, are you chicken?'

'A half a million dollars?'

'Bet!'

'Robin, honey,' said Cook's front half nervously, 'that bet is a little large - '

'Shut up, Henry.'

Henry's right, Cook thought. For him, Cook, to win a lot of money on the fixed race was one thing; for his hostess to lose this gigantic sum was, in some obscure moral sense, quite another. He felt he should try to dissuade Robin.

'Toffec-Apple,' he said, his voice reverberating strangely in the tarpaulin dome of his hump, 'Toffec-Apple is pretty good.'

'We-hell,' said Lough, 'that is a smart camel.'

'Half a camel,' said one of his friends.

'A smart half of a camel.'

'Personally,' said Cook, 'I wouldn't bet against Toffec-Apple.'

'Who in hell's this?' said Robin.

'A friend of mine, Robin,' said Cook's front half.

'Ah, Henry, you and your friends. Dicky Lough's friends here, at least I can see their faces.'

Lough's friends laughed quickly and loudly.

'Where did you find him, Henry?'

'Not really at the party,' said Cook. 'Just back legs.'

'He's helping me out,' said the gentle old man in the front half. 'It's a very friendly act, Robin.'

'I see that, I see that.'

The party in the small room broke up cheerfully. Jarro and Barty went off to find their wives; Lough and his friends disappeared in a tight, low-voiced group; the projectionist was packed off brusquely. Robin and the camel were left: Robin attending minutely to her amazing little face, the camel patiently drinking.

'Henry,' said Robin, turning finally from the looking-glass, 'I want you to come help me with this party, baby.'

'Certainly, Robin.'

'Climb out of that camouflage. It doesn't suit you.'

'Very well.' The old man unzipped his section and stepped out obediently. He turned to the back half. 'Will you be all right?'

'I'll be fine,' said Cook. 'Don't worry about me.'

'I'm very, very grateful, sir.'

'Pleasure,' said Cook.

Robin and the old man went out together. Cook sat down wearily in a low leather chair in a corner, the enormous folds of the camel's empty half falling about his chest and knees. He was full of whisky and exhausted by excitement. Presently he fell asleep.

'... so that's the position, Dicky-boy, that is the position.'

'All I need is *time*.'

'You had time. You had a lot of time, Dicky-boy. Now you have two weeks.'

Cook stirred. Into his dream of a small, warm manor-house of honey-coloured stone broke these brutal American voices. He shifted his eye-holes gently and peered across the room. Lough, looking harassed, and his nasty little friends.

'Let's us be absolutely straight on the position, Dicky-boy. Let's us be re-elly straight --'

'Sure, sure,' said Lough.

'You cover the price of the shares, in cash, by the end of next week, or we go to a Federal Grand Jury.'

'Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Dicky.'

'I'll have it next week, fellows. I say I'll have it next week. Next Sunday. I say I'll have it Sunday --'

'That's nice, Dicky. That's nice news.'

'I'll have it off Robin.'

'You think your horse will win that race, Dicky?'

'Certainly, sure he'll win it.'

'That Larksong looked good to me, Dicky.'

'Looked pretty good to me, Dicky.'

'Your horse better win, Dicky.'

'Your horse certainly better win.'

'You better see it wins.'

'You certainly better see to that, Dicky.'

'We don't want to lose our dough, Dicky, and you don't want to lose your head.'

'You don't, Dicky-boy. That's God's own truth.'

The group of neat, dark men looked at Lough for a moment in silence, then turned together and walked briskly out of the room. Lough stared after them. Worried sick, thought Cook. Worried silly. Well, he's all right. Pity in a way – horrid little man. But if I'm all right, he's all right. And I'm all right. Ho ho, yes, I'm all right.

Lough frowned and walked out slowly. Presently Cook unravelled himself and got a drink.

Later he was found by Robin and thrown out once more. He no longer minded. He trundled home with Ron, singing *Una Furtiva Lagrima*, of which he knew only the first line.

'It's a shame,' said Ron, dropping him outside the pub.

'No no, Ron,' said Cook dreamily. 'No no.'

'I say it's a shame,' said Ron primly.

He crashed the breakdown van into gear and went grinding off towards his garage.

'NICE,' admitted Roly. 'Nice.'

They had bowled down from London on a bright, dusty morning. They had eaten, in a parched meadow near Salisbury, a picnic lunch put up by Cook's landlady, and drunk a bottle of Chablis. The woods were beginning to turn - early, because of the hot, dry summer - and the combines were slicing through the ripe wheat. Now, at half past two, Roly steered his Dainler through the warm brick gates of the house they had come to see.

Four acres of park, with elms and chestnuts and a huge knotted oak, sloped up to a low terrace. The house was William and Mary; dark brick, white paint, beautiful. The farm was eighty-three intensively cultivated acres.

'Yes,' said Roly, 'nice. I see what you mean, Desmond.'

The owner showed them round: a Miss Haslam, elderly, birdlike and rich.

'I am miserable to be leaving,' she said. 'Miserable, miserable.'

'Why are you? Too big for you?'

'No, no. The house is warm and most easily run, as you see. And the farm has latterly been quite well let. But, most unfortunately, my brother has become frail and needs me, and requires a warm climate. We are to go,' she said with distaste, 'to South Africa. I must begin a garden all over again -'

'Pity,' said Cook, 'wretched. Lucky for me.'

The house was perfect. 'Perfect,' Cook said. 'Perfect,' admitted Roly. A pale green L-shaped drawing-room with huge south windows on to the paved terrace. A sunny little morning-room, a study, a dining-room with a connecting door into a warm white kitchen. A gun-room, a flower-room, a pantry, an enormous larder. The floors waxed and

glistening, Adam fireplaces, dozens of electric points. A cobbled yard behind, a brick stable-block, two well-modernized cottages. An acre of walled garden, cultivated to the last inch, with honeysuckle and Paul Scarlet roses tumbling over the walls, two asparagus beds, celery trenches, thirty yards of sweet peas, fifty yards of fruit-cage with currants and raspberries and gooseberries, cordon apples and pears lining the paths, greenhouses with tomatoes and grapes and carnations, a row of peach trees and fig trees on the south wall, an ancient walnut tree in the middle.

The farm was equally ideal. Cook inspected, with his newly qualified eye, the clean and well-built cow-house, the dairy with its shining aluminium milking-machines and its scrubbed concrete floors, the Dutch barn and the root-store and the tidy, well-hedged acres of stubble and pasture.

'You've spent a lot of money here,' said Roly.

'Yes,' said Miss Haslam. 'Why not?'

'Absolutely,' said Roly. 'Absolutely.'

They walked back to the house and Cook potted again through the perfectly proportioned rooms. He turned on a tap in one of the bedrooms: the water was almost boiling. He opened the door of a built-in cupboard: spacious, spotless, bristling with hooks to hang things on. He went to a window and stared out over the neat green park to fat farmland and woods and a line of hills.

Home, he thought. Absolutely. *My* house. He had to sit down, overwhelmed with happiness and relief.

'Attracted,' he said presently, downstairs to Miss Haslam.

'Many people have come to see it, of course,' she said.

'Nearly all of them made me offers.'

Cook felt a jab of panic. 'You haven't - I mean I must -'

'I did not care much for any of them,' said Miss Haslam.

'I am determined that my successor should be *right* for the property.' She glanced at Cook, blinking her little brown eyes behind her spectacles. 'I thought of asking £25,000, Major Cook.'

'Fair,' said Roly.

'Done,' said Cook gruffly.

'I am happy that my house is to have an occupant of whom I believe it would approve.'

'Happy too,' said Cook. 'Very happy.'

They shook hands. Soon they had tea, and Cook and Miss Haslam discussed the possibility of his buying curtains, carpets, some of the larger pieces of furniture, and all the farm machinery.

'Are you really going to have £25,000, Desmond?' said Roly as they drove away through the trees.

'More.'

'How much more?'

'Forty and a bit.'

'My God.'

'I'm very lucky,' said Cook. 'Very lucky man.'

The same afternoon, at Wolverhampton, Jack Curtis had a winner in a three-year-old handicap.

Two races later he saw Mario Montevarese in the paddock.

'Congratulations, Jack.'

'Thank you. We thought of running yours next week.'

'Yellow Silk?'

'Her leg's absolutely better – she's in beautiful shape. Her work's fantastic, Mario!'

'She is perhaps better than I thought.'

'She is, perhaps. She's entered at Windsor on Tuesday, but we thought Ascot again, on Thursday.'

'Fine, Jack. I leave it to you.'

'What do you know about a filly called Larksong?'

'I know everything about Larksong. My mother bred her out of her mare Larkspur –'

'Yes, I know all that. But how good is she?'

'She is very good. *Very* good.'

'Will she win at Longchamp on Sunday?'

'They tell me yes. Oh, I think so, yes. I will put it like this, Jack – how good is my little Yellow Silk?'

'Hard to say how good she is on the course. She didn't

beat much at Ascot, but she couldn't have won, easier, could she? But the way she's been going at home – by God, Mario, it's a pity she's not in the classics.'

Mario nodded seriously. 'I can tell you that she and Larksong worked together at San Ruggiero in the spring and Larksong was a stone and a half the better.'

'A stone and a half better than Yellow Silk?'

'In the spring, yes. Certainly that much.'

'Then Larksong will win on Sunday. Absolutely.'

'You will back her?'

'My God, yes.'

'I too. Tell me, Jack . . . Is Polly here?'

'Yes, I'm waiting for her.'

'Did she,' said Mario awkwardly, 'get the things I sent her?'

'Yes.'

'Did she seem – at all pleased?'

'Well,' said Jack, embarrassed, 'it isn't always easy to tell what Polly's thinking –'

'Yes it is.'

'Yes,' admitted Jack.

'So? The roses and things? The orchids and things?'

'I'm sorry, Mario.'

'What did she do with them?'

'I'd just as soon not tell you –'

'What did she do with them?'

'Stupidly destructive,' said Jack. 'I'm sorry, Mario. I was livid with her.'

'Ah. And that book? And the letters? And those telegrams?'

'Mario, I'd much sooner not tell you.'

'All right.'

'I don't know what's wrong with the rotten girl,' said Jack violently. 'She won't tell me what it's all about, and you say you don't know –'

'No,' said Mario miserably. 'I don't know.'

'I wish to God I could help. But I've tried and I can't.'

'Here is Polly,' muttered Mario.

'Polly! Hi, Polly! Here's a friend of yours - '

'Where?' said Polly, looking directly at Mario.

Mario opened his mouth to say something, but instead turned and walked away slowly, fumbling with his hat and his newspapers.

'Poor Mario,' said Jack tentatively.

'Don't say that.'

'Can't you for God's sake - '

'No, Jack. Talk about something else. *Talk about something else.*'

'Yes,' said Jack heavily, 'all right. I've got to make a bet.'

'The next? What do you think?'

'Not the next. The Charles de Gaulle. Larksong. I've got to back Larksong.'

'Oh, Jack, no - '

'Don't be potty. Did you see Yellow Silk yesterday? See that gallop she did with the three-year-olds? See the way she left them? Remember Ascot? I think she'd win the Guineas if she was in. Maybe the Oaks. My God, maybe the Leger. Well, I asked Mario about Larksong, and he said she was a stone and a half better!'

'Oh God,' said Polly faintly.

'If that's true nothing in the world can live with her on Sunday.'

'Don't put,' said Polly, aghast, 'don't put too much on - '

'I'm putting every bloody penny I've got on, and all the credit I can raise. Don't you understand? A stone and a half better than Yellow Silk - don't you understand?'

'Yes,' said Polly, 'yes, but - '

'I'm off to the rails. She'll start odds-on, I should think, but if I get my money on now - '

He strode off. Polly leaned on the paddock rail, sick with shock. Jack was going to bet far more than he could afford on . . . on a selling-placer in a top-class race - on an almost useless filly in the championship of the world for two-year-old horses. And she couldn't stop him! She couldn't warn him!

As for Mario, whose doing this was. . . .

A woman beside her clucked with obtrusive sympathy. Polly discovered her face was covered with tears. She hurried angrily to the Ladies and leant against a wash-basin, sniffing and dabbing and swearing.

Later, back at Guin's Lodge, Jack was pulling suitcases out of a boxroom.

'But I don't *want* to come to Longchamp,' said Polly.

'Yes, you do. It'll do you good. We can't get out of it now.'

'I just don't understand why Mommard's taking us.'

'I've won some races for him this season, and he's giving us a treat to say thank you. It is a treat, too.'

'You, all right. Why me?'

'As a matter of fact I asked him to ask you. So he very kindly did.'

'But I hate flying and I hate Paris and I hate -'

'No you don't. You're just being childish.'

'But - but, Jack, I'll see -'

Before she finished her sentence Polly turned and ran away to her own room, not wishing to cry yet again in front of Jack.

'Obby, hey, Obby, said Robin DeFoe on Tuesday morning, 'this Charles de Gaulle thing is on Sunday, right?'

'That is correct, Robin. Sunday is correct.'

'When do we go to Paris?'

'Friday, Robin, straight after the meeting in the City.'

'What city?'

'London. The City of London, Robin.'

'Jesus, why not say so? So what happens Friday?'

'Heath Row, four p.m. Charter airplane to Paris. Reservations at the George V, and

'O.K., don't crowd the details, just so we go. Who's going?'

'You, me, Gloria, Chuck, Deac, Mary-Louise, Gracie,

Dolly, Shroeder, Zim, Charlie, Mandy, Greg, and little Josephine.'

'My husband? Don't I have a husband?'

'He has to come on after, Robin. He has to come Saturday.'

'Why? He say why?'

'He said he has a poker game Friday evening at the embassy.'

'Ah, bless him. Well, it's only twenty-four hours. I guess I'll bear it. But I don't like it and *you* know I don't like it and *he* knows I don't like it. . . . Where is he now?'

'He has a poker game, Robin.'

'Ah, bless him. Now, you got him an airplane reservation?'

'Ten o'clock Saturday evening. Yes, we got him a seat.'

'You didn't forget like you once forgot?'

'Never again,' said Obby. 'Never again.'

'Yeah. You backed my horse, Obby?'

'I certainly have. I certainly have.'

'Why the hell do you say everything twice?' said Robin crossly. 'Once is plenty enough.'

'Sure, Robin,' said Obby, and checked himself from repeating: 'Sure, Robin.'

Meanwhile, in Regent Street, Cook was paying a deposit for Miss Haslam's house and farm.

He crossed his cheque with a flourish and pushed it across the table.

'Thank you, sir.'

'Thank *you*,' said Cook. 'Thank *you*, thank *you*.'

On Wednesday morning, at San Ruggiero, a chestnut filly was being coaxed into a horse-box.

'Back you go, silly bitch,' said the Princess.

'Come on, baby,' murmured Patsy McCalla.

Then she was in and the doors were shut.

'Four days to the big race, mam.'

'Just four days, Patsy.'

'You've been to a lot of trouble, managing this.'

'I've waited forty years. You wouldn't have me throw it away for lack of a bit of trouble.'

'It's a strange world, then. Will I go in the box with Giovanni, mam?'

'That'll be it, Patsy.'

'We'll see you there, then.'

'We'll see you all three there, Patsy.'

Patsy giggled. 'There'll be the red faces at Longchamp.'

'Och, red. They'll be purple and puce and primrose.'

'Quite a flower-garden there'll be in the stands.'

'Quite a bloody herbaceous border.'

Patsy climbed into the cab beside the driver and leant out of the window to wave. 'Good-bye then, mam.'

'Good-bye, Patsy, *a rivederci*, Giovanni.'

'*A rivederci, Altezza.*'

The horse-box rolled away down the laurel-banked drive.

The Princess walked back towards the house, clasping her freckled hands, laughing and laughing.

And on The Curragh, at the same time, a lad was leading Toffee-Apple to the box that was to take him to the aeroplane.

'Easy, gently, easy,' called O'Mara, the trainer.

'He's going easy,' said the lad. 'He's the one loves the box.'

'Much good may that do him.'

'Will he not win, sir?'

'What do you think, Terry?'

'I think not.'

'And I think not. But he's a nice one. He'll win his races, and the good races, and any race but this race.'

'It's a shame – steady, my man! – this Italian's in the field.'

'That's the shame, Terry. That is the shame.'

Sixty miles away the grey colt Phoenix Park (100 to 8 for

the Charles de Gaulle) was going into his box. He was sharing an aircraft with Toffee-Apple. His owner was backing Larksong.

Julep (8 to 1) was over the Azores, on his way to a stable near Rouen. Back in his native Kentucky they were hoping for a place. .

Canasta (100 to 6) was having a final gallop near his stables on the edge of the Ruhr. The German owner and his Hungarian wife had backed him, out of loyalty – and had backed Larksong too, much more heavily; Canasta was leaving the next day.

At a famous stable near Rome, Tancredo (10 to 1) was being rubbed down after a gallop, watched by his co-owners (four counts and a tall, blonde actress) and their friends and families. They told their friends to back him but had, themselves, backed Larksong. Tancredo was leaving in two days.

At Malton the fast, queer-tempered Late Frost (7 to 2) was stamping and complaining in his stall. His owner, a Grimsby man, had backed him. His trainer had had a heavy bet on Larksong.

Perelandra (5 to 1) from Venezuela was installed twelve miles from the course. She carried a lot of Latin-American money, but her owner had hedged his bets.

Near Le Touquet, in a celebrated stable financed by the wool industry, Lucky Jim (8 to 1) was reaching the peak of his condition. The owner, trainer, and stable-lads had all backed him. The jockey had had a quiet, late-night telephone conversation with Paris, putting several hundred thousand francs on Larksong.

A few miles away Christi (any price you liked) from Sweden was nuzzling a bucketful of oats. A few bets had been laid on his finishing last.

Late money was pouring on to Larksong and her price was shortening by the hour. The bookies were laying off their bets as fast as they took them. She would start (everyone said) 6 to 4 on or worse.

On Wednesday evening, in London, Mario Montevarese was on the telephone to his mother at San Ruggiero.

'Sì, mamma,' he said. '*Arriverò domani sera.*'

'Don't be late. I want you to give me dinner.'

'Yes, Mamma.'

'*Stai sposare quella ragazza?*'

'*Non so, Mamma,*' said Mario miserably, '*non so.*'

'*Peccato.* That's a pity, boy. See you tomorrow in Paris, then.'

'See you tomorrow.'

On Thursday afternoon several men came to see Dickinson Lough at his London hotel room. They were Louis Panetti, the realtor from Chicago, Max Schneider the steelman from Cincinnati, and the other small, smooth men who had talked to him at Robin DeFoe's party at Doncaster.

'You don't have long, Dicky boy, to find that dough.'

'You don't have very long, Dicky.'

'I'll find it, fellows,' said Lough. 'I practically have it.'

'You still hoping your Candy-bar will win that race Sunday, Dicky? Is that where you're getting our dough?'

'Toffee-Apple. Certainly he'll win.'

'Here's hoping, Dicky-boy.'

'Certainly no harm in hoping, Dicky.'

'Certainly no harm in that.'

'The race is three days away, right?'

'That's right.'

'Just three days. Have a lot of luck, Dicky.'

'Have all the luck in the world, Dicky-boy.'

Presently, when they had left him alone, Lough made some telephone-calls; and in the evening a man came to see him: a thin man with a beautiful velvet collar and a grey hat with a broad black band. They talked for a long time. Then they shook hands and the man with the velvet collar went into Soho to see some friends.

On Friday morning Dickinson Lough walked across the

tarmac to his aeroplane. A little behind him, and pretending not to know him, walked the man with the velvet collar. A little farther behind, and pretending not to know either of them, walked three men with thin, well-shaven chins and tiny dark eyes.

Early on Saturday morning Larksong (the one they called Larksong) was finishing a final spin at her temporary stable, thirty miles from Longchamp.

Ugo the jockey, a stocky little Piedmontese, dismounted.

'Come va, Ugo?' said the Princess.

Ugo shrugged and wrinkled up his small brown face.

Pierino the trainer, plump and shiny in his pearl-grey suit, shrugged also and turned to the Princess. '*Non è famosa, Altezza.*'

'No?' said the Princess happily. '*Veramente, Pierino?*'

Larksong (the one they called Larksong) was led into the stables and they began rubbing her down.

A hundred and fifty yards away, on the roof of a disused barn, above the peeling pinkish posters for Dubonnet and Michelin tyres, a man watched through a telescope. He had a thin, clean-shaven chin and tiny dark eyes.

At half past five on Saturday afternoon Dickinson Lough sat in his hotel room in Paris. With him were the dapper man and his three sharp-shouldered friends. Lough talked for a time and then gave the dapper man a lot of money.

At six o'clock, half a mile away in the George V, Robin DeFoe sat drinking whisky with her retinue posed about her. Obby was nearest; the others adopted positions in carefully judged concentric rings. Little Josephine, the hairdresser's secretary, was farthest away by the door.

'Well, Obby, what are we doing?'

'You tell us, Robin.'

'Jesus, doesn't anybody have an idea around here except me?'

'Sure, Robin, but we figured you'd like to -

'O.K. We'll have dinner and then go somewhere and then on somewhere and then on somewhere. Is that what you wanted?'

'Yes, Robin,' said Obby uneasily. 'Uh, that's great.'

At six-thirty, a quarter of a mile away, Mario and his mother were drinking Bitter Campari.

'Andiamo dove stasera, Mario?'

'Come voi, Mamma.'

'Make your bloody mind up, boy. Take me out and amuse me. I'm feeling like celebrating.'

'All right.'

At seven o'clock, near the Étoile, Jack and Polly Curtis were having a drink at the bar of their hotel with their host, the genial M. Mommard.

'And tomorrow, Jack?' said Mommard. 'Larksong, I think?'

'She might do it,' said Jack happily.

'You have had a little bet on her? I have had a little bet on her.' Mommard owned a chain of hotels called 'Le Cycling'; his little bet, Jack knew, might be a hundred thousand francs.

'I wonder if I ought to have a bit more on her,' said Jack thoughtfully.

'Oh God,' said Polly quietly.

'You will have to lay the odds,' said Mommard.

'I know, it's ^{laying} betting money. But there won't be a better bet in our lifetime.'

'That is so, Jack.'

'Jack, Jack,' said a cheerful voice, and Polly, hullo, Polly!'

'Keith, marvellous to see you! M. Mommard, do you know Mr Keith Rutley?'

'How do you do?'

'And these people,' said Rutley, 'are Celia and Paddy O'Mahoney.'

'How do you do?' said the red-haired girl and her husband.

'Jack and Polly you know, of course.'

'We certainly do,' said the red-haired girl. 'Hullo, Polly.'

'Hullo, Celia,' said Polly numbly.

'Keith Rutley has the Greenaway Stud,' said Jack to Mommard.

'Ah, Newmarket, yes?' said Mommard. 'Then surely you have Mulberry?'

'I certainly have.'

'Larksong will do old Mulberry a bit of credit tomorrow,' said O'Mahoney.

'And us,' said his wife. 'She'll do us a bit of credit, too.'

'Should do,' said Rutley. 'Mulberry's nominations are going to cost the earth if Larksong's as good as we think she is. By God,' he turned to Polly, 'what a damned narrow squeak we had that day they bolted!'

'Yes,' muttered Polly.

'Larksong bolted?' said Jack. 'When she was at Greenaway?'

'Yes. Less said the better, eh, Polly? Most horrible moment of my life. Never mind, no harm done.'

'What was this?' said Celia. 'What happened?'

'Less said the better. Now somebody buy me a drink - I want to drink to Larksong.'

'We'll all drink to Larksong.'

'Dear little Larksong.'

Polly, sipping her Cinzano, felt old and helpless.

At seven-fifteen Mario began ringing up various hotels, and at seven-twenty-five he had found out where the Curtises were staying. He walked briskly round the Étoile and at seven-thirty-two came into the bar where they were.

'Hullo, Mario,' said Jack. 'Do you know M. Mommard? Polly, here's Ma -'

'See you later,' said Polly violently, putting down her drink and hurrying out.

At eight o'clock, in London, Cook and Roly sat down to dinner at Blazon's. Roly was taking Cook to the airport; Cook was giving him dinner.

'Desmond,' said Roly very gently, 'I'm an old friend -'
'No good, Roly.'

'I take you down to Wiltshire. You come and stay. I'm taking you miles to your bloody aeroplane -'

'No good, Roly. Gave my word.'

'Just tell me this. *Is it Larksong?*'

'Mum. Got to keep mum.'

'I'm going to back Larksong. *I'm going to have a pound on her.* You'd tell me, wouldn't you, if I was wrong?'

'Mum, Roly. Sorry.'

In Grosvenor Square Robin's husband (small, pink, elderly, with gold-rimmed glasses and a gentle smile) stood up from the card-table and began buttoning his waistcoat.

'Thank you very much, gentlemen, very much, fellows.'

'Sorry you had lousy cards, Henry.'

'That's quite all right, quite all right. Thank you, anyway.'

'Have a good trip. Hope your horse wins.'

'Not mine, Gregory.'

'Your wife's horse. Sure, your wife's, of course.'

'*B.E.A. flight 996 to Paris,*' came a girl's prim voice over the loudspeaker. '*Will passengers assemble in the Departure Lounge, please -*'

'Good luck, Desmond.'

'Thank you, Roly. Nice of you to bring me down.'

'Well, you didn't want to go on a bus. Here's something for the flight.'

'Oh, Roly - damn kind of you.' Cook opened the wrapping and peered at the label on the bottle. 'I call that damn nice, Roly.'

'Be careful. None of this ooh la la. Stay away from the Left Bank.'

'Yes, I promise. Good-bye, Roly.'

•‘Good-bye, Desmond.’

Cook picked up his fat old suitcase and walked off after the other passengers.

Roly watched him go, feeling a great happiness. Old Desmond, he thought, finally made it. Perfect house, pots of money. I’ll go and stay and we’ll walk round the park and go and look at the greenhouses and talk about the trenches, after dinner, with the rain on the dining-room windows. . . .

Over the Channel Cook grew bored with the flight maps of Europe provided, for his instruction, in the little string bag hanging from the back of the seat in front. He remembered Roly’s bottle – Rémy Martin, also with a map – and pulled it out of its paper.

He leant out into the gangway. The steward was up at the far end, comforting someone.

‘Corkscrew,’ called Cook. ‘I say, hi, corkscrew! Corkscrew, please –’

A mild pink face peered round at him from the seat in front.

‘Yeah? You call me?’

‘Good God,’ said Cook. ‘Front of the camel!’

‘Why,’ said the old man, smiling gently but with great pleasure, ‘my back legs! I’m very pleased to see you again Mr –’

‘Cook.’

‘Of course. My name is Wilmington – Henry Wilmington.’

‘How do you do?’ said Cook. ‘Join me? Empty seat here.’

‘That will be a very, very great pleasure, Mr Cook.’ He moved back, and Cook shifted inwards to the next seat.

‘There we are,’ said Cook. ‘Now, need a corkscrew.’

‘That was funny, there. I thought it was me you were calling. I was surprised, believe me – no one’s called me Corkscrew in forty years.’

‘Corkscrew? You’re *Corkscrew*?’

‘Sure. Kind of a silly nickname, I guess. It’s what they

called me at Harvard – they said I drank an awful lot, and secretly confidentially I did, too.’

Now wait a minute,’ said Cook, suddenly very clear-headed. ‘Wait wait wait. Your name is Wilmington –’

‘Henry J. Wilmington III.’

‘And you were at Robin DeFoe’s party –’

‘Well, I should think so.’ The old man laughed mildly. ‘I’ve been her husband for a very, very great many years.’

‘Exactly!’ said Cook triumphantly, as though he had manoeuvred his companion into a fatally damaging admission. ‘Now, wait. What was it he said – Good God, I’d forgotten all that side of it! Madness! – “Hock and Moselle, the two of them, and along came Corkscrew”.’

‘Ah,’ said Wilmington, ‘along came Corkscrew. I certainly did.’

‘Hock and Moselle? Yes? Well?’

‘The two sweetest little pippins a man ever saw. They did some kind of a song and dance act in a vaudeville theatre – a music hall, you call it. I saw them once, once only. Believe you me, Mr Cook, they were terrible. On the stage. When I met them I thought different, though. There was this party a man gave – I was in London, visiting with some people – and a fellow says “Corkscrew, you ought to meet the two finest little bottles in London – Hock and Moselle!” Well, I said I’d seen their act and they were wonderful, which believe me was a lie. . . . But what a pair of pippins! I got off with Moselle – I was a fast worker in those days, believe me or not, Mr Cook. Red hair, came from Aberdeen – and, Mr Cook, believe me when I say she was a lulu! We ate a lot of suppers for a week or so, and then one evening, funny thing, she didn’t show for a date we had. Hock came instead, just to tell me sorry from little Moselle – she was sick, it seems. Hock came from Brooklyn – long, golden hair, and a long way from home, poor little thing. . . . Well, I went to dinner with Hock instead – and bingo! Along about August we were married. And I want to tell you, Mr Cook, and you’ll understand me when I say it, I’ve never, never regretted it. A great girl, a great lady.’

‘What happened to Moselle?’

‘She was sore for a while, I guess, like any girl would be. She got over it – well, wouldn’t you think so, looking at me? And then she had all the breaks – she married an Italian – a prince, how about that? He had a load of money. My little Robin had to make all hers – I never had any, not after my family cut me off. Well, they never did get to understand Robin. Moselle – my gracious, I haven’t thought about her in years. I don’t think she’d bear a grudge, not for long. I don’t think she’d do that.’

‘Grudge,’ said Cook. ‘Good God, yes, grudge! That was the other thing!’

‘What? What say, Mr Cook?’

‘That was it! “And all these years she’s been burning up with the grudge. And that’s why they’ve done this damned thing – ” That’s what he said! Something like that – ’

‘All these years? Ah, surely not, Mr Cook. I’d hate to believe that.’

Cook gave a roar of anger. ‘You see what that damned old woman’s done?’

‘No,’ said Wilmington, frightened.

‘Revenge! The whole thing’s revenge! Just for revenge!’

‘But, Mr Cook – ’

‘Pretending it was an accident! Pretending she was protecting her son! Good God, think of that old mad-woman, sitting there working the damned thing out. . . .’

‘You’re upset, Mr Cook. I’m sorry if it’s something I said.’

‘Let me think,’ said Cook. ‘I’ve got to think.’

He poured himself out some more brandy. His hands shook with anger, so that he spilled brandy on the grey imitation leather of the little hinged table.

A disgraceful thing, he thought. A deplorable, unbalanced, female thing. Got to fix this. Got to put this right.

‘Got to put this right,’ he shouted. ‘For God’s sake be quiet and let me think!’

'Is anything the matter, sir?' said the air hostess. 'Can I give you anything?'

Cook turned to Wilmington. 'Got to see your wife at once.'

'But she isn't on this airplane. She's in Paris.'

'Yes? See her when we get there.'

'I don't know just exactly where she's liable to be -'

'Find her. First importance.'

'Why, we'll certainly try if it's important to you, Mr Cook. I know she'll be very, very pleased to see you again.'

They rang up the George V from Le Bourget. No, Miss DeFoe was not in the hotel. She and her party had left soon after eight o'clock. No, they had not said where they were going.

'Damn,' said Cook fretfully. 'Where would she go?'

'Any place. Any place she likes.'

'Where does she usually go?'

'There's a little joint on the Boulevard St Germain, and another one near there, and then, why, plenty of places in some of those little streets over there -'

'Have to go and look. Coming?'

'Surely.'

They spent nearly thirty pounds on taxis and found Robin at three in the morning. She was sitting, wide awake and cheerful, on a tall bamboo stool in a bar called Le Texas Ranger. She was wearing a grass-green satin sheath, a diamond-studded belt, and a short sable coat. The entourage, sleepy and cross, were dotted about drinking Coca-Cola.

'Why, Henry!' she called. 'This is marvellous! You came and found me! This is simply marvellous! They have a

kind of a Rye here tastes different from any Rye I ever drank -'

'Got to talk to you,' said Cook, perching like a kite on the stool next to hers.

'Get this creep outa here,' shouted Robin. 'Everywhere I go he crashes my party.'

'Got to listen.'

'I don't like you, buster. Move your rump. Obby, throw him out.'

'Sure, Robin,' said Obby nervously, putting down his glass of greyish milk and side-stepping towards Cook.

'What happened to Moselle?' said Cook. 'Was she really ill?'

'What?' Robin's manner changed. 'Do you mean the Moselle I mean? Little Jeannie? I haven't thought about her in years - she a friend of yours?'

'Ha,' said Cook, 'you could say so.'

'Hear that, Henry? He's a friend of Jeannie's! Hear that, darling?'

'It seems, Robin -' began Wilmington.

'Have a *drink*,' said Robin to Cook. 'You better have a *drink*.'

Cook had some brandy and presently asked about that distant evening.

'Sure she was sick, sick to her stomach. Nothing serious, you know - just a little chill. Well, I made her go to bed with a hot bottle. . . . You know, for a while I kinda felt she thought I moved in on Henry -'

'Ah.'

'But I swear to God I didn't. I mean I didn't *intend* to. That evening I was just pinch-hitting, you know? The way girls do, as a favour to her, so's he wouldn't get caught by any she-wolf. He was *attractive*.'

'Yes, I'm sure -'

'A little woolly bear, believe me. Well, we fell in love. I couldn't help it, he couldn't help it. If I thought she thought I *stole* Henry, really moved in on purpose, why' - she shook her head - 'I'd be mighty upset.'

'She does think so.'

'To this *day*?'

Cook nodded.

'Women are the damndest things. To this *day*?' Robin whistled. 'That we got to put right.'

'Yes.'

'You believe me, don't you?' The tiny, enamelled face under the smooth roll of silver hair looked serious and worried.

Cook nodded again. He did believe her.

'Hell, I don't even know her name now. Henry, we don't even know Jeannie's name now, do we?'

'I do,' said Cook.

'Sure, of course, you're a friend of hers. Look, you give me her address and I'll write her in a day or two -'

'No,' said Cook. 'Not good enough. Come and see her.'

'She in Paris?'

'Bound to be.'

'Hey, that's lucky. I'll go see her - well, Monday, I guess -'

'Not good enough. See her tonight.'

'Are you crazy? It's a half after three a.m.'

'See her now. Got to. First importance.'

'Look, she doesn't want a raft of people coming around at a half after three a.m.'

'Yes she does,' said Cook. 'Come on.'

'Where?'

'Good God, we'll find *out*. Ring up. Ring up everywhere.'

'That's Obby's job. He loves to telephone. Obby - come here - start ringing all the hotels and find out where. . . . What's her name now, Cook?'

'Montevarese. Princess Montevarese.'

'What? But that's who I bought Larksong from!'

'That's right,' said Cook grimly. 'Exactly.'

'Well, of all the . . . *Jeannie* sold me *Larksong*? Henry, you hear that? Jeannie - well, Jesus, isn't that something? Hey, Obby, you find her yet?'

'Not yet, Robin,' called Obby from the telephone.

'Hurry it up, then, hurry it up!'

They had another drink and presently Obby found the right hotel.

'But I cannot disturb a guest now – at four in the morning – no, sir, that is not possible.'

'You tell her,' said Cook, 'you tell her –'

'I tell Madame la Princesse nothing at this hour, sir. In the morning we shall tell her.'

Robin strode in, and her husband and entourage settled like exhausted birds all over the dim-lit hall.

'This fellow says no,' said Cook helplessly.

'Let me talk to him,' said Robin.

'Madame –'

'Shut up and listen.'

The Princess lay dreaming of revenge. Her face was covered in a sticky yellow cream derived from queen bees, her red hair was crusted with plastic curlers, her ageing body under the sheet was clothed in a girlish pink nylon nightdress with ruffles at the sleeves and lace at the breast. A shrill, discontinuous buzz interrupted her dream and she woke up and reached crossly for the bedside telephone.

'*Madame la Princesse,*' said the night reception clerk nervously, '*il y a un monsieur qui veut absolument vous voir –*'

'Bloody hell-fire!' said the Princess.

'Larksong,' came Cook's voice, bellowing into the telephone. 'Crisis. Got to see you.'

'*Monsieur, s'il vous plaît –*' came the clerk's voice, scandalized.

'Come up,' said the Princess.

She got stiffly out of bed and put on her pink satin dressing-gown and her tangerine feathered mules. A minute later there came a knock on the door.

'*Qui est-ce?*'

'Desmond Cook.'

'Come in, Major. Got your money on, I hope?'

'Got to talk to you.'

'What's this crisis that's so dreadful you have to come calling at -'

'You're a wicked and ridiculous old woman.'

'What?'

Cook stood stiffly by the door. 'You were wrong that night. Rotten hysterical jealousy - sickening thing. Hock didn't mean to pinch the fellow. She had the best intentions. You made a fool of yourself for half a damned century. Good God, if they fell in love it wasn't her fault -'

'It's true, darling -' Robin had burst into the room and stood facing the Princess. 'It's true, Jeannie. You must believe that. You were sick, you know you were, and I didn't want poor little Henry going out on his own -'

The two old ladies stared at each other. The Princess's cream-smeared face looked stupefied. Robin's was earnest and pleading. Suddenly they rushed towards each other and embraced, weeping and laughing and making it up. Presently the Princess sent for a bottle of whisky and the three of them clinked glasses and drank.

'Now, honey,' said Robin finally, 'what's this I hear about Larksong?'

'I had to sell her, you see, and I sold her to yon little agent -'

'O'Mahoney, yes. He did a good job. Maybe I'll hire him again.'

'Naturally I didn't know who he was buying for. Then I found out it was you.'

'Ah, baby,' said Robin. 'And me you hated.'

'Silly old bitch I was.'

'No, honey. It's easy to understand.'

'It is not. I should have trusted you, Robin -'

They wept and embraced again, and Cook poured out more whisky for them all.

'Anyway,' said the Princess, 'I had this other filly looked exactly like Larksong, and I thought - I've waited forty years for a chance like this! So I took your money and I sent Larksong off to England to run in little races and get

lost, and – and the useless one's thirty miles from here, running in your colours tomorrow!'

'Today.'

'In eleven hours,' said Cook. 'Shocking thing.'

'Everyone at your stables must have known, honey –'

'They did not. The trainer, the lad who did her, little Patsy McCalla, and my butler.'

'Why your butler?'

'Och, he knows everything, eh, Major Cook?'

'Yes,' said Cook.

'Well, I got a new trainer and a new lad and Patsy took off to England – as you know, eh, Major?'

'Yes.'

'So it wasn't difficult. Ah, Robin, how *could* I, how *could* I?'

'Well now,' said Robin cheerfully, 'we have to get the right Larksong here.'

'We can't –' The Princess began to cry again. 'Robin, what have I done to you –?'

'Maybe we can. Where is she?'

'Lambourn.'

'Where the hell's Lambourn?'

'In the middle of England.'

Robin shook her head. 'You have loused things up a little, honey. But we'll fix it. Cook, you go get Obby while I start using this telephone. Jeannie, baby, you get dressed, and give me a little more of that Scotch –'

At a quarter to five they were ready to go. Obby had raised a self-drive Simca with insurance and documents for England. His assistant Gloria had found out, from a furious travel agent, that a Silver City car-ferry aircraft left Le Touquet at seven-forty-five. The Princess had dressed. Cook had drunk several glasses of whisky.

The whole retinue wanted to come, but Robin shouted them down and got into the driving-seat. The Princess sat beside her and Cook got into the back. The car roared away, accelerating fast and skidding round a corner.

'Funny thing,' said Wilmington, 'I never did ask where she was going.'

They sped along the empty streets, nearing the edge of Paris.

'We'll maybe need some help,' said the Princess.

'We'll find it when we need it.'

'Like my son, you see, or his trainer-boy -'

'Sure, honey, but then the secret's out.'

'God Almighty, that's true. We'll have to manage.'

'Ah, we'll manage. We have Cook.'

'That's true,' said the Princess. 'We do have Cook.'

'My God,' said Cook, 'wait a minute.'

'No waiting now,' said Robin.

'Listen, my God, I've backed the wrong one!'

'I wondered when you'd wake up to that,' said the Princess.

'I'm sunk!'

'Och, you'll likely lay off your bets.'

'But it's Sunday!'

'You'll likely manage.'

'Oh my God,' said Cook, 'oh my God.'

They raced north and the sky lightened and the sun came up over Belgium.

They barely caught the Silver City freighter.

'Hey,' said Robin when they were airborne. 'This tub won't take a horse-box.'

'Have to charter something,' said Cook.

'Then we got to get the horse to the airport, and there's the other end -'

'How much time have we got?' asked the Princess.

'Seven hours,' said Cook gloomily. 'Need a helicopter.'

'That's it!' said Robin. 'Door to door - that's it!'

'Robin, darling,' said the Princess, 'you can't get a horse into a helicopter.'

'Why not?'

'A horse is *big*, love'

'We'll get a big helicopter. We'll get the biggest.'

At Gunn's Lodge Yellow Silk (the one they called Yellow Silk) was cantering, the fine muscles moving powerfully under the brilliant gloss of her coat. There was a heavy dew, and the horizontal cobwebs of early autumn were strung about the wet grass, glistening in the low sun. There was mist in the bottoms and a very pale sky.

'Scorcher,' said the lad, 'going to be. Lucky girl, you, Yellow Silk. Nothing to do all day after this -'

They reached Lydd at a quarter to nine. Robin ran to a telephone.

'Lollipop? Hev, Lollipop?'

'Who's that?'

'Robin DeFoc.'

'Hullo, Robin, good morning. Thought you were in Paris.'

'You did? Listen, you make helicopters. Do you have a *big* one?'

'How big?'

'Big enough to carry a horse.'

'Good Lord, yes.'

'Ah.'

'That's to say, we shall have shortly. The Flying Horsebox. Twin rotor, powered by -'

'How shortly?'

'We've got the prototype, and I think we'll be in commercial production in about -'

'Lend me the prototype? Hey, Lollipop? Little Lollipop?'

'Robin, Robin, I'd do anything for you, but -'

'And your very best pilot, hey, Lollipop? And I'll need some kind of a ramp to get the horse into the thing -'

'Robin, Robin, listen -'

'And I need the helicopter at a place called Lambourn not later than noon today. Got it?'

'Robin, this is *Sunday* - it's a *prototype* - I can't -'

Presently Robin came out of the telephone box. She looked thoughtful.

'Well?' said Cook.

'I hope,' said Robin. 'I don't know, but I hope.'

A few minutes later she was driving as fast as she could north-west across Kent, away from the sun.

'In you get, pretty,' said Patsy McCalla. 'In - you - get.'

Larksong (the one they called Larksong) rolled her eyes and rushed up into the box. Patsy climbed up after her and the doors shut on the two of them. Giovanni climbed into the cab and the box slid down the road and away towards Longchamp.

Three miles away, on the Longchamp road, the dapper man with the velvet collar looked at his watch. He nodded to his sharp-featured friends. They nodded back impassively, and one of them worked the bolt of a small automatic pistol.

The Simca reached Gunn's Lodge at a quarter to twelve.

The Princess immediately took charge, convincing the head lad that she was Yellow Silk's owner's mother and bullying the whole stable. In a few minutes the silly was ready to go. Then Robin and the Princess sat on a grass bank looking up into the empty, pale sky and listening for the beat of engines.

Cook, meanwhile, hurried into the house and tried to telephone a bookmaker. He tried, altogether, eight firms. But it was Sunday. No one answered. In the end he hung up very gently and walked out of the house and over to the others.

'Any luck?' said the Princess. 'Have you shifted your bet, Major?'

'No,' said Cook. 'Damned lazy lot.'

'It's Sunday. The English Sunday.'

'They're a damned lazy lot. I'll have to try on the course when we get there.'

'You'll do it on the course, no doubt about it.'

'Oh God,' said Cook, 'I hope so.'

At twelve o'clock Dickinson Lough sat in his Paris hotel

room, near the telephone, smoking a filter-tip cigarette very fast.

At three minutes past twelve Robin looked at her watch and said: 'Jesus.'

'Quiet,' said the Princess.

And immediately they heard, away to the west, the hard churning of the helicopter's engines.

A few seconds later it swung into sight, flying low: a huge machine like a railway carriage with two rotors and many wheels. They stood up in the smooth paddock and waved and shouted, and presently a great wind flattened the tall grass at the edge of the field and pushed at the trees and the helicopter hung drunkenly and landed and the giant rotors wobbled to a stop.

A young man in a felt cap scrambled to the ground. 'Miss DeFoe?'

'Mighty nice of you to show,' said Robin.

'Where's that horse?' shouted the Princess.

Then Larksong was walking delicately towards the helicopter, and the pilot was showing the lads how to bolt the ramp into position.

'How's Larksong going to like this?' said Robin.

'Lovely traveller,' said the Princess. 'Quiet as a lamb.'

The horse was half-way up the ramp when Cook said: 'Just had a thought.'

'Quiet,' said the Princess. 'Easy!'

'What's going to happen,' said Cook, 'when the *other* Larksong gets to the course?'

'Jesus,' said Robin. 'Two Larksongs.'

'Someone may smell a bit of a rat,' said Cook mildly.

'They'll be smelling it all the way up home in Aberdeen,' said the Princess.

'They'll smell it on the Wilshire Boulevard,' said Robin.

'All serene, m'lady,' said the head lad. 'You'll have to sit and chat with her.'

'Sure, we'll have a great gab,' said Robin. 'But I don't know about these two Larksongs.'

'Hurry!' said the Princess. 'Let's get in.'

At half past twelve they were hoisted aboard and the pilot started the engines.

At twenty to one Giovanni, driving the box gently towards Longchamp, slowed down for a bend and then accelerated in a long, tree-lined straight. A few hundred yards ahead there was another box, parked, pointing the way they had come. He neared it, and suddenly felt the jolting of one of his rims on the road: a bad puncture.

He muttered, braking hard, and then got out of his cab and down on to the road to look. The tyre was flat and badly gashed, and all over the road there were evil little spikes.

He bent to pick one up, and saw on the road the shadow of a raised arm. He began to turn, but a cosh came down and he was knocked out.

'*Che c'è?*' called Patsy from the back of the box. 'What's up, Giovanni?'

The doors opened and the ramp dropped. Two men with thin, clean-shaven chins and tiny dark eyes gestured with their guns.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' said Patsy.

He dropped obediently on to the road, and was coshed and rolled into the ditch.

The men ran to and fro, picking up the little spikes. Then the other horse-box rolled forward. The chestnut filly was coaxed into it. The doors banged shut. The box drove away: away from Longchamp: away from the big race.

At five to one Dickinson Lough stubbed out his cigarette and immediately lit another. Then the telephone rang. He picked it up and listened. After a moment he smiled.

'Yes,' he said softly. 'Good.'

He hung up and breathed a great gust of relief. 'Whew!'

Mario, worried and puzzled, made the hotel people find

the night receptionist. He appeared in his dressing-gown, cross and sleepy, just after one o'clock.

'Alors, ma mère est partie avec qui?'

'Je ne sais pas, monsieur. Une vieille Américaine et un monsieur anglais -'

'À quelle heure?'

'Vers cinq heures.'

'Et ils n'ont pas dit - ?'

'Ils n'ont dit rien, monsieur, rien.'

'Obby,' said Henry Wilmington at twenty-past one, 'let's go over it again.'

'She said the car had to be able to go to England,' said Obby patiently. 'That's all I know.'

'That's how I remember it. But we don't know where in England and we don't know why.'

'That is correct, sir.'

'The damndest thing,' said Wilmington. 'She just *left* England. I don't get it. Do you get it?'

'No,' said Obby.

'It certainly is the damndest thing.'

At twenty-five past one the helicopter crossed the English coast. Robin and the Princess were comforting Larksong, who was sweating a little but standing quietly. Cook, airsick and frightened and very hungry, sat beside the pilot.

The moment we arrive, he thought, I'll find a bookie. Bound to be one who knows me there. Bound to be one over for the day, just to see the race. . . .

If only it wasn't Sunday. If only I had something to eat.

At two o'clock, just before the first race, Dickinson Lough came into the bar at Longchamp with Louis Panetti, Max Schneider and his other friends. He ordered champagne, smiling and expansive.

'Does Dicky know something we don't know?' murmured one of his friends to another.

'I don't want to know what he knows. Just so he wins.'

'Just so he wins and we get our dough.'

'Just so we get our dough.'

Lough overheard the last part. 'Don't worry, fellows,' he said. 'I want to tell you not to worry. Your glass full, Max? You want a cigar, Louis? Any of you guys dry? I want to tell you not to worry one little bit.'

At five past two the first race started and finished. Mario found Pierino, his mother's trainer, and then went on looking for his mother. He was very surprised and badly worried.

Henry Wilmington, Olby, Gloria and all the rest of the retinue down to little Josephine were trying to find out where Robin had gone.

At ten past two Patsy McCalla sat up slowly and rubbed his head. He went over to the crumpled body of Giovanni and woke him up by pinching his ear-lobe. They started changing the punctured tyre of the horse-box.

At a quarter past two the helicopter crossed the French coast and swung over the broad, rolling fields of Normandy. The two old ladies were cooly reminiscing about their music-hall days - singing, in neat, old-fashioned voices, their Rhinemaidens song and other songs of the day. Larksong looked at them placidly, her delightful face tranquil. She had stopped sweating.

Cook felt battered by the noise of the engines. He badly wanted a drink.

'Dove,' said Pierino to Mario, wringing his hands, '*dov'è la mia piccola Larksong?*'

It was twenty past two, and the runners for the second race were in the paddock at Longchamp.

'Should be nearly there,' shouted the pilot to Cook.

Cook nodded dumbly.

'You'll remember this one, Robin,' said the Princess. 'How did it go? – *I've broken out of Finishing School, I've broken the apron strings* –'

'Ah, that was Maggie, dear little Maggie – remember the hat she wore?'

They laughed together, remembering.

At twenty to three at Longchamp the runners for the third race – the big race, the Prix du Général Charles de Gaulle – were given out over the loudspeaker.

'Larksong,' said Jack to Polly. 'Then she *does* go. Thank God for that.'

'Did you think –'

'Somebody said she hadn't arrived. Trainer's in a muck sweat, Mario's going about as white as a sheet –'

'Perhaps she's got lost, perhaps she's not going to get here –' said Polly, a wild hope rising.

'Christ, what a terrible thought. Oh Christ, I hope you're wrong –'

At a quarter to three Cook sighted the course.

'There,' he shouted to the pilot. 'Left. Port.'

The helicopter swung round and the blunt nose pointed at Longchamp.

'Not too near,' shouted the Princess.

'Not too far,' shouted Robin.

'Land where they can't see us.'

'We don't want to wear the horse out getting there, honey.'

'We must stretch her legs.'

'How's she going to run after this?' shouted Cook.

'God knows, but she'll do her best, won't you, my little pretty?'

Dickinson Lough lit another cigar and walked comfortably across the grass. O'Mara, his trainer, was waiting for him. Toffee-Apple, glossy and fit, was being led through the

crowd by a travelling-lad in gaiters; Lough watched proudly, sucking at his cigar and beaming.

The helicopter settled jerkily down behind a low stone farmhouse half a mile from the course. The engines trundled to a stop and the silence seemed appalling.

'Out we get, then.'

'Going to have a job with the ramp.'

'We'll manage.'

Nearly all the runners were in the paddock: Toffee-Apple, the grey Phoenix Park, the local hope Lucky Jim, Tancredo with his group of spectacular owners, Late Frost, Julep, Canasta, Perelandra. The only ones to come were the Swedish colt Christi and Larksong.

'They were saying,' said Toffee-Apple's Irish jockey to Lough, 'that Larksong has not arrived, sir.'

'That so?' said Lough happily. 'That is a shame.'

Half a mile away, behind the farmhouse, the Princess began running round and round in a small, sour field. She was leading Larksong. Her hair flew out of its pins and crinkled wildly and she lost one of her shoes.

'Hurry *up*, honey,' cried Robin in agony.

'Know - this - filly,' panted the Princess. 'Got - to - stretch her - legs.'

'You, Cook,' said Robin. 'You go and get rid of the phoney Larksong.'

'How?'

'Find Jeannie's trainer - what's your trainer called, baby?'

'Pierino Perotti.'

'Find this Perotti and tell him to make the phoney Larksong vanish.'

'Well,' said Cook, 'but I've got to fix up about my bet.'

'Plenty of time. Now jet, buster, jet!'

Cook trotted off obediently.

'Hurry *up*, honey,' shouted Robin again to the Princess.

'Won't - be - a minute - '

A French farmer and his wife and an echelon of children came out of the house and stood in a long row, watching silently.

'Christ,' said Jack to Polly in the paddock. 'Nearly time. Where is the bloody horse?'

'There's the colours,' said a man. 'See that stupid blue with the red "d"? That's the jock. It *mus*' be running.'

'Well, but,' said Jack uneasily, 'where is she?'

'Well, Paddy,' said Keith Rutley, threading anxiously through the crowd, 'where's your star purchase?'

'Oh God,' said O'Mahoney, 'this can't happen to me.'

'I feel terrible, our being here, Obby,' said Henry Wilmington. 'All of us here having a good time and not knowing - not knowing -'

'She'd want it that way, Mr Wilmington.'

'Certainly she would, Mr Wilmington,' said Gloria. 'She'd want us all here to see her horse, even if she's -'

'Dead?' said little Josephine, the hairdresser's assistant.

'Hush up,' said Obby, horrified. 'What a thing to say!'

'I feel terrible, though,' and Wilmington, 'just terrible.'

Ugo the jockey looked at Pierino for the hundredth time, his dark eyes puzzled and his monkey face anxious. Henry Wilmington pushed out of the crowd and joined them. The three of them looked at each other unhappily.

Suddenly a tall old man with a purple face trotted painfully up to them.

'Why, Mr Cook!' said Wilmington. 'Is Robin here? Where have you been? Is Robin here?'

'Perotti!' gasped Cook.

'*Sono Perotti.*'

'Get rid of the filly!'

'What is the trouble, Mr Cook?' said Wilmington. 'And will you please tell me where Robin is?'

'I'll come to that. Where's Larksong - *your* Larksong?'

'Seemingly,' said Wilmington, 'Larksong hasn't arrived. Seemingly Mr Perotti here is pretty worried.'

'Hasn't arrived! Why not? My God, what a piece of luck! Why not arrived?'

'Mr Perotti doesn't know why not and he's very, very worried.'

'Ha,' said Cook. He thumped the little trainer on his pearl-grey shoulder. 'Fine. I'll go and fix up my business, then.'

'Just a moment, Mr Cook,' said Wilmington mildly, and took Cook's arm.

'I'll be back in a second,' said Cook, trying to shake him off. But the old man had a surprisingly firm grip, and he clung bravely, using both hands.

'I believe you owe me an explanation, Mr Cook.'

'Later,' shouted Cook.

'Oh, no. I believe I have a right to know right now where my wife is, where you took her, and exactly what occurred.'

'Chaperoned throughout,' said Cook. 'Princess was there throughout. *Please let me go -*'

'Why, certainly, Mr Cooke, the moment I have a satisfactory explanation.'

Cook was aware, sickeningly, of the seconds cantering past.

'Very well,' he said. 'We had to go to England to collect Larksong.'

'Larksong? In Inghilterra?' said the trainer.

'Come, Mr Cook. Try to do a little better than that.'

'Please let me go,' said Cook. '*Please let me go.*'

'No, sir. Begin right at the beginning.'

'The beginning. . . .'

Dickinson Lough threw away his cigar.

'Well, boy,' he said to his jockey, 'this is one you win, hear me?'

'Yes, sir. . . . Ah, there's the filly.'

'What filly?'

'Larksong, sir. And will you look what she's got leading her?'

Lough turned, thunderstruck.

Larksong, the beautiful Larksong, came delicately through the crowd. An old woman was leading her: a wild-haired harpy with a face scarlet with exertion but triumphant and happy.

'Mamma!' cried Mario, and elbowed through the crowd and ran across to her.

'*Eccoci, Mario.* Now you're going to see a race.'

'Where have you *been*?'

'Busy.'

The dapper man with the velvet collar saw Larksong, and his mouth fell open with surprise.

Lough hurried across the grass and said: '*Well?*'

'I don't know, Mr Lough. I don't know what gives. But I *do* know Larksong is in a little tin garage fifty-three miles from here.'

'Then what in God's name is that horse?'

'I can't say.'

'By God, they're running a ringer.'

'O.K., Mr Lough, let them have their fun. If it's not Larksong they won't win, you know that. . . . But if they *do* win, why, you can object.

'Yeah, I can, can't I?'

'Thank Christ for *that*,' said Jack Curtis.

Polly looked down the course at Larksong, cantering easily towards the start with her long, perfect stride. Oh God, she thought, oh God.

'Here's Mario,' said Jack. 'Hey, Mario, does your mother always cut things so fine?'

'Not always,' said Mario, still laughing with relief that his mother was all right.

He looked at Polly nervously. She stared at him for a second with a look of horror and then turned away and raised her race-glasses.

'A ringer,' said Lough, beaming again over a new cigar. 'How about that? A God damned ringer.'

'You go up there and object, Mr Lough.'

'I might do that. I might just do exactly that.'

'Oh, darling,' said Henry Wilmington, 'you had me worried.'

'Why, baby?'

'Where have you *been*?'

'We had a little errand. Why are you holding on to poor Cook?'

'We were having a talk, darling. I felt I had a right to know where he'd taken you.'

'*He take me?* Henry, lamb, what a laugh.

'I still feel I have a right -'

'You let go poor Cook, baby. Fixed up your bet yet, Cook?'

'No,' said Cook miserably.

'Then go *do* it, you jerk. You'll be too late.

Cook nodded, paused for a moment, then turned and trotted away.

Cook began plunging through the crowd, dodging among the people who thronged the front of the grandstand. They all had their race-glasses, now, trained down the course towards the start: none of them saw Cook coming. He cannoned off a stout man, ricocheted among a group of cloth manufacturers' wives, side-stepped a pale little boy in a tweed cap and very short blue shorts. A murmur followed him, outraged and astounded: but he charged on, his mind racing and his heart sick with foreboding.

All his money on the wrong bloody horse.

The runners were under orders now, and the crowd buzzed and crackled.

He loped round the corner of the stand, dodging an ambulance man. His heart began to pound, heavily and worryingly. His legs felt like porridge. He struggled on, and came at last to the small barred windows of the Pari-Mutuel. One window had only one man at it: a neat man, making a small, neat bet. Cook clung to the iron rail by the window, panting painfully. His face felt wet and hot and his whole body was sticky with exertion and fatigue. The neat man finished and hurried away and Cook lurched to the window.

'Agh, agh,' he said, trying to control his breathing enough to form words.

A bell rang and there was a low roar from the crowd.

'*Non, monsieur,*' said the face behind the grille.

'*Mais, damn, mais -*'

'*C'est embêtant, je le comprends bien, mais c'est ça.*'

The window slapped shut. The runners were off.

'Oh God,' said Cook aloud.

He began running again, back towards the stand, looking for a bookie: any bookie he knew: any bookie who would

lay him a bet on Larksong and save something out of the crash.

Then his heart leapt, for he saw Gaudy Carroll trotting along beside the stand.

'Gaudy!' he tried to shout. But only a high, thin wail came out. He made a great effort and shouted again: 'Gaudy!'

But the crowd was humming now, a full ripe harmony from piccolo to tuba.

'Gaudy!' shouted Cook.

But Gaudy's plump figure disappeared round the corner of the stand. Cook ran after him. He saw him for a moment, bobbing along among the fringes of the crowd; he took a huge, shuddering breath and ran on. Then he lost him. He pushed frantically through the dense, unnoticed crowd. The hum was rising to a blare. No Gaudy.

Wildly Cook saw that the horses were nearly half-way.

He looked round, desperately searching for a familiar face in the great slope of faces piled up in the stands above him. Blank white footballs, millions, all backed Larksong, shouting like fools. . . . Then he saw Robby Rigby, a bookie from London with a wide yellow face: he'd do it! he'd do it! Robby was a dozen rows up in the stand and Cook began an impetuous, nightmare climb. The soft mass of French bodies walled him from each successive step; he charged and clawed and elbowed, forcing tiny gaps, whimpering and struggling and purple.

'Robby - ' he shouted: but the noise of the crowd was rising to a bellow and his voice was whisked out over the course. He lost his papers and a form-book and his hat; his collar, grubby from the night and morning, was soaked and greyish; his shirt and trousers clung as though he had been dunked in lukewarm tea. 'Robby - '

The noise of the crowd mounted to an inexorable climax. Cook turned helplessly to face the course, and saw Larksong draw ahead of Toffee-Apple to win by half a length.

All round Cook there was happy babel. People kissed; people laughed. Tension relaxed, glasses went back into

cases, the crowd began to move. Cook clung to an outcrop of metal tubing as the people flowed sluggishly down the grandstand. The sweat gathered coldly in the small of his back and he concentrated numbly on his iron handhold: it was painted green, and felt rough to the touch, and was warm. He moved one hand, leaving a dark smear of perspiration where his palm had been. The great soft-bodied crowd broke round him, reforming like interrupted treacle. Green, rough, warm – he clung to the iron, thinking: start again. Have to start again.

Mario gave a great whoop, the uninhibited Latin seeming to burst out of his sober, expensive English clothes.

‘Back her, Mario?’ called Jack happily.

‘Of course I backed her! Beautiful Larksong! I’m rich!’

‘He’s rich, Polly,’ shouted Jack, ‘and I’m rich –’

‘Mario backed her?’ said Polly, amazed. ‘But he can’t have backed her –’

‘Of course he did, sausage! We all did!’

‘But Mario knew she couldn’t – he knew she wasn’t the right –’

‘Come on, Polly, booze time!’

‘But he couldn’t have known she’d win – he must have known she couldn’t possibly. . . .’

‘But she did, silly nut, like we all said. Now booze time, Polly, booze booze booze! Don’t you *understand*? I won a *mass* –’

‘He must have thought,’ said Polly wonderingly, ‘he must have thought it *was* Larksong –’

‘Stop maundering,’ shouted Jack. ‘Was Larksong? Of course it was Larksong! What did you expect – Kertin? Now *booze*, Polly, celebration –’

‘He couldn’t have known! He never knew!’

She saw Mario standing three yards away, looking at her. She rushed to him and took hold of his lapels.

‘Hullo, Polly,’ he said nervously.

‘You didn’t know she was at Lambourn?’

'Who was at Lambourn?'

'You didn't know! It wasn't you!'

Mario found himself holding a weeping Polly, her hat knocked crooked and her arms round his neck. He was utterly baffled; he hugged her with enormous joy.

Robin and the Princess were tearfully embracing. Then the Princess embraced Henry Wilmington, then Robin again, while Pierino embraced Wilmington. Mario and Polly hurried up, with Jack grinning behind, and Mario embraced the Princess. The Princess embraced Polly. Pierino embraced Mario. Robin and her husband embraced each other.

'Come along now, dears,' said the Princess finally. 'We've a horse to talk to.'

They started happily towards the unsaddling enclosure, and everywhere people saluted Robin and greeted her jubilantly in French and English and other languages.

'Flag up,' said Jack. He laughed. 'Looks like an objection.'

'My God, it is an objection.'

'Objection!'

'Objection!'

They looked at each other in consternation.

'Come on,' said the Princess. 'You, Robin, you, Pierino. Let's see what this bloody nonsense is.'

'So there is, you see, doubt,' said the polite interpreter, 'about the identity of this horse.'

'*È Larksong,*' insisted Pierino. '*È certamente Larksong.*'

The stewards – elderly French generals, dukes, and millionaires – looked at the trainer gravely. He was questioned, closely and slowly, by another interpreter.

'*So benissimo,*' he said, pounding his fist into his plump left palm, '*che quel cavallo si chiama Larksong e sempre s'è chiamato Larksong. Sempre! Sempre!*'

'Of course she's Larksong,' said the Princess. 'I bred her, I should know.'

'Of course she's Larksong,' said Robin. 'Jesus, would we run another one when we had her?'

'The owner of another horse,' said the first interpreter, 'claims that your horse is not Larksong, but a different one.'

'Grr,' said the Princess in an angry baritone. 'Bloody poppycock.'

'*L'autre monsieur, s'il vous plaît,*' said a general sharply, to a man at the door.

Dickinson Lough was shown in.

'Jesus,' said Robin. 'So that's it. Now anything may happen.'

'I'm sorry it had to be this way, Robin,' said Lough sadly. 'You'll appreciate I had to tell these gentlemen what I knew.'

'Yeah? What did you know?'

'Excuse,' said the interpreter. 'Madame Montevarese, what is the number of your horse-box?'

'God Almighty, I don't know.'

'A pity. What make?'

'What they call a Fiat.'

'Exactly. And it came this morning from Chantilly?'

'Near there.'

'Exactly. A friend of Mister Lough saw a box with a Turin number-plate parked on the Chantilly road, fifteen kilometres from here, just before three o'clock. The men were changing the tyre -'

Robin and the Princess looked at each other.

'Jesus,' said Robin. 'What a lump of luck.'

'Ay,' said the Princess. 'Providence put a nail on the road.'

'Excuse. That was perhaps your box?'

'Perhaps my *other* box,' said the Princess cheerfully.

'Larksong was in that box,' said Lough, as though it hurt him more than it hurt Robin. 'No good trying to fool these guys -'

'*Larksong è lì sotto,*' burst out Pierino. '*Andiamo vederla!*'

'Och, Pierino's right, gentlemen. Come and inspect the animal.'

There was a short, grave consultation among the stewards. Then the whole party trooped down to the unsaddling enclosure.

Toffee-Apple, with O'Mara at his head, stood in the winner's place. Larksong, patted anxiously by Ugo, was in the second and Lucky Jim in the third position.

'What are you doing there?' said Robin angrily to O'Mara.

'Well, Mr Lough said to me - '

'Anticipating, Dicky?'

'Come clean, Robin,' said Lough solemnly. 'No percentage in holding out.'

'Here,' said the Princess. 'Larksong. *Voilà. Ecco.* God Almighty, what else could she be?'

The stewards conferred again, staring at the filly.

Keith Rutley was drinking champagne with the O'Mahoneys.

'Well,' he said, putting down his glass. 'I ought to go and congratulate old Jeannie.'

'We ought to go and congratulate Robin,' said Paddy.

'Robin ought to come and congratulate us,' said Celia.

'Yes, she's bound to love us again. Come on.'

They pushed through the crowd by the unsaddling enclosure and became aware of anxious, stricken faces and a high, worried buzz of conversation. Then Celia saw the objection flag.

'Christ,' said Paddy. 'Did she cross?'

'Not that I saw.'

'Come on.'

'Jeannie,' called Rutley, 'Hi, Jeannie! What's happened? Many congratulations - she's a wonderful filly! She does old Mulberry credit, eh? What's this objection? Who's objecting? Hi, Polly, good afternoon, hullo, Mario - '

'Keith,' exclaimed the Princess, 'by God, just the man.'

'What's this?' said Keith, looking round. 'Why is this colt saying he's won?'

'Keith - you remember a wee accident happened one day at your place?'

'Do I not. I wouldn't have had it happen for the world - you know that. Nobody can blame you, Polly - it might have happened to anyone. I blame myself, though, Jeannie, always have. Still, it didn't affect her form, now, did it?'

'Mario,' said Polly, 'Mario, what horse is this?'

'Larksong, darling,' said Mario, surprised.

'How can it be?'

'How can't it be?'

'Of course it is, Polly,' said Rutley. 'Here. Let's see - ' he peered at the near side of Larksong's powerful chest. 'Here!' And there it was: a small, puckered scar.

'Excuse,' said the interpreter. 'Mister - '

'Rutley.'

'The stewards understand that this horse was foaled at your stud.'

'Yes.'

'And the scar?'

'One good thing - it means you can tell she's Larksong.'

'Excuse. Messieurs - '

The stewards began to file past the filly, inspecting the scar on her chest.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' said a small, weary voice.

'Patsy!' cried the Princess. 'What happened to *you*?'

'Strange doings, mam - *what is that filly*?'

'Larksong, Patsy.'

Patsy ducked between two stewards and stared briefly at the horse.

'This is a miracle,' he breathed. 'A holy miracle.'

'What *happened* to you, Patsy?'

'What they call an ambush, mam, there on the open road. What's happened to Yellow Silk we don't rightly know.'

'Lough!' said Robin sharply.

But Lough had disappeared.

Polly grabbed Mario's arm. 'I don't understand. How did she get here?'

'Don't try, my ducky,' said the Princess. 'Just thank that bad old major. . . . Where is the major? He galloped away and I want to give him a hug.'

'Me too,' said Robin. 'Me too.'

Giggles Ballantyne, precarious on her five-inch heels, came wobbling down the front of the empty grandstand. Stanley had left her and she had promised to stay still till he came back, but now she had to find a Ladies. All that wine! She felt warm and sleepy and quite happy, considering all these foreigners. It was sweet of Stanley to bring her, really, for all it wasn't really him paying. A sweet thought.

She teetered on down the concrete steps, and presently passed a long, thin figure in a crumpled blue suit: an old man, reading a little black book. She had seen him somewhere – he was English!

'Good afternoon,' she said politely (for gentlemen liked to be recognized), 'haven't we met?'

The old man glanced up from his book. He looked awfully tired, Giggles thought. Late nights in gay Paree. And at his age! But he half-rose, very politely.

'Afternoon,' he said.

'Warm,' said Giggles.

'Ah.'

'Funny place to read.'

'What?'

'I said you found a funny place to read your book.'

'Yes. Didn't seem able to move. Tired, rather.'

'Very busy you look. Quite a scholar.'

'Trying to find the winner of the Cambridgeshire. Tricky race.'

'Really?' said Giggles conversationally. 'Tricky, is it?'

'Got to start somewhere.'

'Oh yes,' said Giggles. 'I suppose so.'

The old man bent down to his book again and began turning the pages very slowly. He *did* look old.

'Well, bye-bye,' said Giggles. 'Lovely to see you again.'

She started on down the steps, wondering if 'Les Madames' was all right to ask the way to.

When she got to the bottom she looked back, up the empty concrete tiers, at the old man sitting with his book. He was writing something down on a piece of paper. Then he started turning the pages again, very slowly, as though they were heavy.